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THE LOST KEY

AN INTERNATIONAL EPISODE

HON. LADY ACLAND



1st Edm

Edm



THE LOST KEY



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THE LOST KEY

AN INTERNATIONAL EPISODE

BY

THE HON. LADY ACLAND

Author of "Hugh Moore," "Love in a Life," etc.

LONDON

JOHN MACQUEEN

49 RUPERT STREET, W.

1901

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L'ENVOI

THE Author of Ecclesiastes believed that the world was very old, and that men had drunk the cup of experience to the dregs. The learned are now inclined to think that, whatever the age of the material earth may be, the human race upon it is very young, and that the throes from which we suffer are the growing-pains of childhood. Be that as it may, we who have passed through what has been called the Decadence of the Nineteenth Century, have seen, in the midst of an undeniable decay of religious faith, and to some extent of morals, a sudden revival of vigorous national life, with its inevitable accompaniments of sacrifice and suffering nobly borne. The Gospel of Evolution has been preached to us for half the century ; but it is a curious fact that the Semitic statesman who boldly proclaimed his belief that it was open to him to choose between the Angels and the Monkeys, should have been the very man to give the first impetus to the great wave of Imperialism, which has since his death risen to such

imposing height and covered so many waste places of the earth.

A novelist must not moralise, except indirectly ; and my business has been to paint on a small canvas, with a few colours, some of the shifting scenes that pass on a little corner of the world's surface. There, as in a Microcosm, I have tried to show a few of the elements which are still seething and struggling for mastery—the old and new leaven, which the Twentieth Century may possibly fuse into one. So far as the portraiture is exact, it is of things, not persons: in these pages there is no photograph of any individual, inasmuch as I profess to write a story, and not a record of contemporary scandal.

THE LOST KEY

AN INTERNATIONAL EPISODE

CHAPTER I

THE START

"I HAVE had a rather startling proposal, Margaret," said Mrs Somers to her daughter, as they stood one September evening by the newly-lighted fire in the drawing-room.

"What is it?" asked the girl, in a fresh, musical voice.

"Lady Maude Beaufoy was here while you were playing tennis, and she wants you to go with her to Malta this winter. She says she has two or three sick folk to look after, and she wants you to enliven the party."

"Cheerful for me!" laughed Margaret. "What on earth can make her want me to come?"

"She has fads, like many other great ladies——"

"And small ones," put in the girl.

"And takes people violently up for a time; but if you like to go, I don't see why you shouldn't."

Mrs Somers looked at her daughter thoughtfully. Margaret, like most of her generation, was taller than her mother by several inches, but she inherited Mrs Somers' fresh, fair complexion, with its accompaniments of well-opened blue eyes and pale golden-brown hair, and what was perhaps even better, her well-poised head and firm, upright carriage.

"We must ask your father," added Mrs Somers. "He won't like you to miss the hunting."

"I am not sure if I want to go," answered Margaret. "It would be delicious to see the Mediterranean, but I don't feel as if I knew Lady Maude well enough, and I should like to know who the rest of the party are. I don't think I could stand Christopher Beaufoy without a good deal of assistance."

Mrs Somers smiled. "If I were a mercenary mother I should say, 'Go and make the most of your opportunity,' but you are too young yet. I am in no hurry."

"That's all very well, mother, but I am nearly twenty-one, and there are all the younger ones coming on. Francie and the rest won't thank me if I stop the way too long. I suppose I ought to go, and see something of the world. Don't you know who the 'sick folk' are?"

"Well, Canon Curteis is one. Lady Maude says

he has broken down and wants rest. Then there is a Mrs Mainwaring, who has just married ; she was a Miss Benson, Lord Assbeton's sister ; she was nursing in an hospital before her marriage, and is ordered to winter abroad, so she and her husband will be there, and Lady Maude's favourite doctor, Dr Masters, is going too, for a holiday, she said."

"What sport!" cried Margaret. "Yes, I must certainly go—throw over good works and enjoy myself. At least I shall get some new experiences. But not even for Francie's sake could I—— Oh! here comes father."

A man of about middle height, and stoutly built, entered the room at this moment.

"Dinner late again," he said. "This new cook is a nuisance. What are you confabbing about? You look like two conspirators."

"So we are," said Margaret, gaily. "We were talking about Lady Maude Beaufoy's invitation to me."

"What's that?" said Mr Somers, quickly. "Odd woman. Don't care much about her. Too many fads for my taste. Always gadding about instead of doing her duty by the place the old fellow left to her."

"She wants me to gad about with her this winter. Think of a season at Malta, daddy! You won't know me when I come back."

"Season at Malta! I daresay. Who is to pay for all the frocks?"

"As to that, we can manage," said Mrs Somers. "We have time, and we won't be very extravagant. I think, perhaps, we had better let her go. She seems to like the idea, and there isn't much chance of giving her a season in London."

"London! I should think not," said the Squire, rather scornfully. "No London seasons till prices mend. Why, only to-day James was telling me he will lose fifty per cent. on those bullocks he bought. What the country is coming to I can't imagine. These blessed politicians neither know nor care. One side is as bad as the other."

The mother and daughter exchanged glances almost involuntarily. Mr Somers' remarks might be incontrovertible, but they had been often uttered before, and there was not much to be said in answer. Dinner proved a welcome diversion. The Squire had been shooting partridges and was hungry, and the new cook received praise as well as blame.

When the meal was finished, and he was smoking his pipe over the newspaper, Mrs Somers and Margaret had a serious discussion over ways and means. It was quite true that the money part of the business required consideration. Lady Maude was generous, and had said the girl would be her guest from the time she left her father's house, but

there was the outfit to be thought of, and Malta dances were very different from an occasional country ball during the winter. Times were hard, and landlords had little money to throw away on festivities, so that many smart clothes were not needed at home, and an extra fifty pounds was not a trifle in Mrs Somers' eyes. As the eldest of a large family, Margaret shared her mother's anxieties and was the confidante of her schemes for the younger children. There were so many of them! Francie and Joan looked like twins, and would be out of short frocks soon. Then there was Harold at Oxford, and Jim and Teddy at school, and the baby boy still in the nursery, while a little green mound in Henbury Churchyard represented the missing fourth girl, the penultimate of the long series. Yet at forty-two Mrs Somers was as strong and brisk as ever, with a slim figure, and hair only slightly touched with grey; and her energy in good works and schemes of all kinds on behalf of her poorer neighbours won her the admiration of all the country-side.

Between her and her eldest daughter there was that sympathy and confidence which speaks well for the character of both, but even more for the mother than the daughter. As yet the girl, leading her wholesome, simple, active, country life, not free from responsibility nor devoid of

interest, but without racket or morbid excitement, had few secrets of any kind, and none that she would not by preference have shared with her mother rather than with other girls of her own age. So when all the difficulties to the proposed visit had been discussed and smoothed away, Mrs Somers saw that a shadow of hesitation still rested on Margaret's forehead.

"What is it?" she said. "What are you thinking of?"

"It is only this," said Margaret, colouring slightly. "You don't think if I go it will put me under any sort of obligation to Mr Beaufoy?"

"Why are you so afraid of him? Has he ever said anything to you?"

"Oh, no, and I shouldn't give him the chance. But you know how he hangs about. And if Lady Maude thought—you know I never could care about him—and if she wanted me to——"

"I don't think it is very likely," said Mrs Somers. "He has heaps of money, and will probably marry a title, as his father did. I haven't noticed anything very marked on his part. Still, dear child, if you are afraid, don't go."

"It would be silly to refuse on that account, I suppose," said Margaret. "You had better write and say I will come, and that will settle it. I hate being undecided."

So the letter of acceptance was despatched, and six weeks later, in a north-west gale, Lady Maude Beaufoy's party embarked on board the P. and O. steamer at Tilbury. On the misery of the first day or two it is not necessary to dwell. Margaret was rather sea-sick and very home-sick, and it was not till the coast of Portugal was in sight that her spirits rose.

Lady Maude was never ill. In the roughest weather she appeared with a little more rouge than usual, but that was all. She never missed a meal, and sent frequent messages to the head cook if the food was not to her liking. As to her age, which was a constant matter of speculation among the passengers, it might have been anything between forty and sixty-five, if one judged by appearances, but the Peerage said she was fifty-nine. Her hair was the fashionable tawny colour and her complexion was carefully arranged to correspond. The result was really artistic, but she was too stout for her height, and she was not equal to the effort of banting, even for the sake of beautifying herself.

Her son, who shared her imperviousness to sea-sickness, wandered a little about the deck of a morning, and then retired to the smoking room, whence he rarely emerged except for meals. It must in fairness be added that there was little attraction on deck until the Monday when, as

we have said, Margaret Somers began to revive and to feel it possible that she might still survive a little longer to enjoy existence.

It was a glorious morning, the sea, calm blue, flashing in the southern sunlight, with the Portuguese hills in the distance veiled in a haze of heat. Lady Maude came up from her breakfast, to find Margaret leaning over the rails, in a rapture of admiration. At her side was Dr Masters, known among Lady Maude's friends as her 'court physician.'

"Good morning, my dear," said the elder lady, "I am glad to see you up. Very unkind of you, Dr Masters, not to wait for me at breakfast. Even Christopher was gone when I came. Why are you all so early?"

"The weather, Lady Maude," and the doctor waved his hand towards the sea as he spoke. "After the winds of the last three days this is heavenly."

"Will you put my chair under the awning, and Miss Somers' by mine," said Lady Maude. "I have seen none of my party yet. How is Mrs Mainwaring?"

"Better. We will get her up before lunch, I hope. She is not coughing much to-day," and the doctor moved off to find the chairs.

"Have you seen Ethel Mainwaring?" asked Lady Maude of Margaret.

"Only when we all came on board. She looked very ill."

"She is not strong. None of us are, with Benson blood in us. She is a cousin of mine, you know. My mother was a Benson. When I was Ethel's age, no one thought I could live ten years. Cold water saved me, nothing but cold water. It was a Dr Mason took me in hand then. When he died, I tried Dr Moore. He was a homœopat. How angry my poor husband was because I tried homœopathy! What I always say is, 'What does it matter what you call it, so long as it does you good?' I always ask the doctors that, and they never can tell me. You ask Dr Masters, and see if he can give you a reasonable answer! Now I'm sure you won't guess why I chose him for my doctor. I will tell you. I had had Dr Mason and Dr Moore, and I made up my mind I would always have a doctor whose name begins with M. A fancy, of course, but like all my fancies it has answered very well. I saw him by chance one day, just after poor dear Dr Moore went out of his mind, and I liked his face, and when I heard his name was Masters, I said, 'You're the man for me,' but he has never mastered *me*, my dear."

As Lady Maude paused to take breath, her son strolled languidly up and saluted the two ladies. He was immaculately dressed in pale grey, with a

pink tie and a straw hat trimmed with pink of the same colour, and Margaret began to feel that her blue serge looked quite shabby.

"Better, Miss Somers?" he remarked, rather than enquired, as he sank into a chair at her side.

"Yes, thanks," she said, briskly. "Can you tell me the names of the places we are passing?"

"Those Portuguese towns? Oh dear, no! I never remember names. But I can fetch you the guide-book if you are cruel enough to say you want it."

Margaret laughed. "I will fetch it myself, presently," she said.

An hour later she knocked at the door of Mrs Mainwaring's cabin, and asked if she could be of any help.

Mrs Mainwaring was still in her berth, and looked very white, but she answered cheerfully :

"Come in, Miss Somers. It is very good of you to ask. I was too tired to get up early, but I am going to try soon. How delicious this calm is after all the tossing! I am enjoying the air so through the open port."

"It is lovely on deck," said Margaret. "I am sure the air would do you good."

"So am I," replied Mrs Mainwaring, "but, to tell you a secret, I am a little afraid of Cousin Maude's tongue. She is kindness itself, but how

she does talk ! When my head aches, she drives me nearly mad."

"It is Mr Beaufoy that drives *me* mad," said Margaret, with a burst of confidence, inspired by the great brown eyes that looked so trustworthy and pathetic in the little plain, sallow face.

Ethel Mainwaring smiled. "Is that where the land lies?" she said ; and then, seeing Margaret blush, she added quickly, "You needn't be afraid. I can keep secrets, and we can help each other. You shall protect me from Cousin Maude when I am ill, and I will protect you from Christopher. Not that old Chris hasn't his good points ! and you know, I suppose, that he is enormously rich, or rather will be, when his mother dies. However, let us talk of the rest of our party. You have met Dr Masters ?"

"I have spoken to him a few times. He seems very pleasant."

"Oh, yes ! he makes himself very agreeable. You ought to know his history. It is rather curious. He was a country practitioner to start with, and in his district there happened to be a great Jewish lady, who was, or fancied herself, very ill, and whom he treated successfully. She brought him up to London with her and started him in practice there by extolling him to all her friends. He asks double fees, and so he has a rich and

fashionable clientèle, but of limited extent, and I am rather sorry I am obliged to trust my valuable life to his care ! ”

“ I thought he was such a great doctor,” said Margaret.

“ No, he is certainly not that. His brother physicians haven’t a high opinion of him, but his pleasant manners and appearance help him on more than any amount of science would.”

“ Lady Maude seems to like variety in her doctoring. She told me she had tried homœopathy.”

“ Oh, I know ! She is too silly about it : but it is no use to get angry ; she simply hasn’t an idea of what scientific truth means.”

Perhaps Margaret looked rather unresponsive, for Ethel laughed and said : “ You must forgive my tirades. You see I went through a little medical training myself. I wanted desperately to be a doctor when I was quite a young girl, but my people would not hear of it. I got my way at last, so far as to begin the course of study, but I found I wasn’t strong enough to stand all the necessary cramming, so I had to content myself with nursing. I see you think that a much more suitable thing for a woman.”

“ Why do you say that ? ” said Margaret, smiling and colouring again. “ I never said so.”

“ I saw it in your face,” replied Ethel, with serene

confidence. "Now you want to ask me a question. What is it?"

"Only if you minded very much having to give up nursing when you married."

"I should never have married if my health hadn't broken down. I looked on nursing as my life's work, and I loved it. But when Lawrence—my husband—came and said he would take care of me, and I found I might be able to help him a little with his work, whereas I had to leave off my own—why, then I married! That's my history. Now tell me yours."

"I don't think I've got any," said Margaret, who was not accustomed to talk about herself.

"Happy girl! Pray never to have any!—And yet I don't know!"

At this moment Mr Mainwaring entered the cabin, and Margaret fled, but not before she had seen the loving smile of welcome in Ethel's face as she greeted her husband.

Margaret took a book upon deck, and pretended to read, in order to escape from conversation, but in reality she was pondering over her talk with Ethel Mainwaring with considerable wonder.

CHAPTER II

THE VOYAGE

THE rest of the voyage passed in comparative calm, but as the ship had been delayed by bad weather in the Bay, she came into Gibraltar rather late, and only remained there long enough to allow one or two passengers to come on board, so that there was no opportunity for a walk or drive through the Fortress. For Margaret, however, there was plenty to be seen from the vessel. The great Rock and its surroundings at sunrise or sunset is one of the most beautiful sights imaginable, and on this particular October evening the colours in the sky and sea were gorgeous, and the masses of the Rock stood out grandly in the deepening twilight. She was leaning over the ship's side as the brilliancy of the sky faded, watching the lights in the town come out, one by one, when a little puffing launch came alongside the huge steamer, and from it sprang a young man whose face seemed familiar to her. At dinner she found him opposite to her, and when she realised that he

was looking at her also as if he recognised her, she suddenly remembered how she had met him—at a pleasant country dance some eighteen months previously. She bowed, rather shyly, and he needed no further encouragement to claim acquaintanceship.

“You have a good memory, Miss Somers,” he said. “I did not think you would have recognised me.”

“I know so few people,” she answered gaily, “that it is difficult for me to forget them.”

A rather loud whisper from Lady Maude reminded her that it was her duty to present her new friend to her chaperon, but the name, “Mr Arthur Gordon,” did not convey much information. Mr Beaufoy studied him through his eye-glass, but said nothing. Mr Gordon did not appear to notice the scrutiny, but Lady Maude immediately plied him with questions.

“Have you been staying at Gibraltar?” she asked.

“I have been left behind there by my ship,” he replied. “I have been in the Channel Fleet, but I have just been transferred to the Flag-ship in the Mediterranean, and I am on my way to join her now.”

“Is the Fleet at Malta now?” asked Lady Maude.

“The Flag-ship is, but only one or two others. There will be more coming in soon, but they

scatter us so much now, that one never knows how long one will stay anywhere. Are you going to stay at Malta?" he added, turning to Margaret.

Lady Maude took the answer out of Margaret's mouth. "I have carried her off for the winter," she said, patting her hand affectionately. "She is going to cheer us up and help me take care of my invalids. Do you know Canon Curteis? the great preacher, you know, a wonderful man. He has worn himself out, and he is coming to us in a few weeks for a holiday. Then there is Mrs Mainwaring, my cousin—let me introduce you—she is ordered out of England for the winter, so you see I want a little health and liveliness to counteract so much——"

"Dulness, Cousin Maude," interrupted Ethel Mainwaring, smiling; "you are quite right; isn't she, Lawrence?" turning to her husband, who sat, silent and abstracted, on her left.

Mr Mainwaring started slightly. "Did you speak? I did not hear what you said," he replied, in the gentle, deferential manner he always used to his wife. She laughed.

"You might as well eat something," she said. "You have passed three dishes, and you won't get any dinner if you go on like that."

"I beg your pardon. I did not notice," he answered, obediently helping himself to the next course. "I was thinking over that paper I was

reading. It is a clever argument, but I am not sure how far it holds water. I will give it to you to-morrow, and then you can tell me what you think," and with that he applied himself to the business of dinner, but obviously without being the least aware what kind of food he was swallowing. He had not even perceived the presence of Mr Gordon, but the young naval officer on his part was studying all his new acquaintances with great interest and curiosity. He thought they seemed rather strangely assorted, and wondered a little at finding Miss Somers amongst them.

During dinner Lady Maude talked incessantly, but afterwards, when there was a move to collect wraps and go into the open air, Gordon waylaid Margaret as she left the saloon, and walked up and down the deck with her. He had been staying with some rather distant neighbours of the Somers' for the dance where he had met Margaret. Leave was a rare luxury, and a ball, except in a garrison town, still rarer, so he had a very vivid and pleasant recollection of this dance, particularly of two or three waltzes with this young lady—young, fresh and unspoilt, light as a feather, and as full of enjoyment as himself. They had never met since, but the prospect of further acquaintance was not displeasing to either of them. It is at a later stage—usually too late a stage—that the question of £. s. d. arises.

Arthur Gordon was the son of a barrister with a large family. He had inherited good brains and a sound constitution. He had passed every examination with credit, and was now appointed gunnery Lieutenant to the Mediterranean Flagship. He had every hope of rising in the Service, but he had ten years' hard work in prospect before he was likely to be 'posted' as Captain, and he certainly ought not to marry for years to come, unless his wife had money.

Happily considerations of this kind disturbed neither of them at this moment. They were discussing their mutual friends in the neighbourhood of Henbury, and then went on to talk of Malta, where Gordon assured Margaret she was certain to have 'a good time,' and as he knew the place well she had only to ask and he would be delighted to furnish any information. He asked her also some questions about her travelling companions. Margaret was already enthusiastic about Ethel Mainwaring, who was altogether a new revelation to her, and whose gentle voice and pathetic eyes contrasted curiously with her extremely advanced opinions on all subjects — social, political, and religious. She had not talked much, as yet, to Margaret, but everything she said bore the stamp of her own unconventionality, and the young girl was strangely fascinated, while half alarmed. Gordon did not

like ladies with advanced ideas, and said so. He also thought the husband looked a very queer sort of fellow.

"Oh, so he is!" replied Margaret, "he is so absurdly absent. I don't think he is sure yet who I am, and he never knows what he eats. She always has to sit by him and tell him what to take. But I believe he is extraordinarily clever, and it is very pretty to see how he looks after her. She is delicate, and he is always covering her up, for fear she should catch cold. I think he has looked through microscopes so much he can't see human beings."

Gordon laughed. "He has big enough spectacles, at any rate," he said; "his face seems to disappear altogether behind them."

They were still chatting happily together, strolling up and down the almost empty decks, or stopping now and then to admire the phosphorescent water at the ship's side, when Christopher Beaufoy appeared with his mother's fur boa, which he offered Margaret, saying Lady Maude was afraid she must be cold. The girl, though annoyed at the interruption, went below at once, after a brief but friendly good-night to the sailor, leaving the two young men together.

"You knew Miss Somers before," said Beaufoy, after a pause.

"Yes, in the country," replied Gordon, stiffly.

Christopher's assumption of guardianship over the young lady had annoyed him.

"Awfully pretty girl. My mother's quite cracked on her."

The sentences were drawled out as if it were almost too much trouble to speak, and Gordon did not answer. They stood together for a few minutes longer, and then, as no further conversational ideas seemed to occur to either of them, they separated with a silent nod.

The next two days passed pleasantly enough. The weather was fine, and Margaret was induced by young Gordon to join in games of 'Bull' or to walk up and down the deck, or sit and talk in easy-chairs under the awning. At other times she made friends with the children going out to Malta or India, amusing them with the art of one who had had large experience in her own family. Arthur Gordon joined in this too. Almost all sailors love children, and it was another excuse for keeping in Margaret's company. In fact, the flirtation, though of such short duration, became rather marked. Ethel Mainwaring watched with benevolent eyes, but Lady Maude appeared somewhat perturbed.

"The young fellow seems nice enough," she said, "but I know nothing about him, or his means, and the girl is in my charge. Besides, there is Chris. I always think he wants to marry her in the end, and I catch him looking rather black sometimes.

She is such a child, and has led such a quiet life. I don't think she knows how to take care of herself. Don't you think I ought to give her a hint?"

"Perhaps," said Ethel, reluctantly. "I always hate to 'spoil sport,' and steamer flirtations need not be very serious. Still, as he will be at Malta, it might be wiser. But it does seem a pity to waken her self-consciousness. It is like Eve and the apple over again."

"I thought you didn't believe in Eve and the apple," retorted Lady Maude.

"I think it is a beautiful myth, and an allegory of human life," replied Ethel, "but that is beside the mark. Don't say more than you can help to Margaret. I can remember now the first time my mother spoke to me in that way, and my cheeks tingle still at the thought of it."

"Well, I don't want to make the child miserable, I am sure," said Lady Maude, good-naturedly, "though how the world is ever to go on if girls are not to be corrected sometimes I am sure I don't know. Suppose you talk to her yourself. She has taken a fancy to you, and you can say it in any way you like. Make her understand she must be careful she doesn't get talked about, that's all. I want her to start fair at Malta. She shall have plenty of fun, but she must flirt all round, not only with one man, or at any rate not till she knows what his means are and if her parents approve."

Ethel sighed. She did not refuse to speak, because she thought she could do so more tenderly than Lady Maude, but she disliked the necessity, which she put down to British conventionalism.

The opportunity came easily enough, the evening before they reached Malta, and to her surprise Margaret, instead of resenting the hint, met her half-way, and acknowledged that she ought to have been more careful.

"Of course you know it is nothing," she said, eagerly. "We had only met once before, so I really don't know him well, but he is so pleasant to talk to, so much more entertaining than Mr. Beaufoy! He has seen so much, and he is clever, I think, and he has been very good-natured and has told me heaps of things about Malta that I wanted to know. He treats me just as if I were his sister, he does indeed. And you know after to-morrow we shan't see much of him. But I promise to be careful. Thank you for telling me."

To Margaret's surprise Ethel gave her a warm kiss as they parted for the night.

CHAPTER III

THE ARRIVAL

IT was a glorious day when the steamer reached Malta ; there had been a fresh breeze from the west, and sails had been set, increasing the speed from fifteen to sixteen knots, so the ship came in sight sooner than the watchers on the signal-station expected, and swiftly passed Gozo and the Commino Channel ; then, as she coasted along the Island of Malta itself, the breeze suddenly dropped, the white horses disappeared as if by magic, and the sea sank into a condition of summer stillness, under a sun blazing still with summer heat, though it was now early in November.

All the passengers crowded on deck to see the entrance. The ship was at some distance from the shore, in order to avoid the shoals, and came rather slowly into the harbour, looking as if she must run down some of the small craft that seemed determined to impede her passage. One impertinent torpedo-boat-destroyer, like a black demon, came so close alongside that the officer in command

recognised Arthur Gordon, who was in uniform, standing among the crowd at the bulwark ; Gordon waved his cap, shouting a response to his friend's greeting, and the destroyer was round in a twinkling and off again outside. Gordon was already doing the honours of Malta to Margaret and her friends.

"That is Barclay in the destroyer," he said. "He is a great chum of mine, and he is in the *Royal Alice* too. It is just like him to show off like that. He is a daring chap, but as good as they make them. That is Bigli there to the left, where our Hospital is. I had two months there once. All the men-of-war are inside, in the Grand Harbour, and all the merchantmen except those in quarantine. Valetta is on the spit of land between the two harbours. It is only the P. and O.'s that come in on this side of Fort St Elmo. One of the biggest guns is there. Now we are in Quarantine Harbour. There are two steamers in quarantine now. Do you see the yellow flag? Now they will make fast in a minute."

The engines had already stopped, and the steamer was surrounded by crowds of 'dghaisos,' the men in them dark and picturesque, true sons of the South, standing up, shouting, hailing the passengers, apparently on the point of fighting with each other, but really all in perfect good humour, only displaying their ordinary way of doing business. Among them, swiftly pushing its way, and

coming up to the gangway before any other, elbowing the little row-boats right and left, came the steam-pinnace sent to receive the mails for the Navy, and to fetch Lieutenant Arthur Gordon.

"I must be off," he said, "and see to my traps. Good-bye, Lady Maude. May I have the pleasure of calling on you at Bello Sguardo? And pray command me if I can be of any use."

Lady Maude answered graciously that she was usually at home at five o'clock during the winter, and Arthur Gordon stole one final glance at Margaret, bowed, and left the deck, which was soon deserted by all the Egyptian and Indian passengers, who were anxious to make the most of the few hours' possible sight-seeing.

The first view of the great fortifications, old and new, that protect Valetta on all sides, cannot fail to be striking, especially seen under a dazzlingly clear sky, and backed by the matchless blue of the Mediterranean. There was no green anywhere, except a few dusty evergreens, for the autumn had been hot, and the winter rains had not begun: everything was brilliantly white in the sunshine, or solemnly grey where the shadows lay in the embrasures of the forts and on the rugged side of the rock, where the houses clustered thickly above.

Even Lawrence Mainwaring seemed to wake out of his usual abstraction. He was giving Dr

Masters a short history of the famous Knights Hospitallers, from their glorious commencement to their ignominious end. Margaret listened too, and wondered at this strange little man's encyclopædic knowledge. He had made friends on board with an artillery officer returning to Malta from his leave, and appeared to have mastered the whole system of fortification on the island, together with the approximate number and calibre of the guns at present in position. He swallowed facts and figures on all subjects with eagerness, and had an extraordinary power of recollecting them. It was only in human beings as individuals that he was not much interested. Colonel Thompson had been first surprised at Mr Mainwaring's questions, but had ended by expressing great admiration for the civilian's unusual knowledge of technical detail, and had made great friends with Ethel in consequence of this appreciation of her husband's qualities. Mrs Thompson was rather overwhelmed at taking four young children out to Malta for the winter, and some of Margaret's small friends belonged to the Thompson tribe. One in especial, called Harry, a boy of five, rather a nervous, delicate child, was her favourite. He had seized her hand when they passed under the first fort, asking anxiously if the guns were going to fire on them, and was not happy till they were out of sight.

At length, one by one, the various parties left the ship. Bumboatmen and servants remained behind to collect the luggage, and the carriages, waiting at the landing-place, drove up the steep incline to the Florian Botanical Gardens, or round the head of Missida Creek,*and up through the Porte des Bombes and Porte Sant' Anna, rattling across the drawbridges and into the noisy streets.

Lady Maude's party, however, drove neither to Florian nor to Valetta, but a mile or so into the country, along the glaring, dusty roads, until they turned into a private drive, almost as well kept as in England, and alighted at the door of a pretty villa, the entrance shaded by a verandah, with delicious views of the sea peeping out between the bushes and round the corner of the house. Inside, the long stone passages and lofty rooms struck delightfully cool. The drawing-room ran right across the house, one large window opening on to the verandah, that faced the drive, while at the other end the window led on to a broad stone terrace, with palms and cactuses grouped together in large pots, where two flights of steps led down through the orange grove to the beach, where the tiny waves were breaking in delicate foam-tracery on the low-lying rocks, leaving pools of clear water where the tide had retreated.

Lady Maude was bustling about the house with the English housekeeper and butler who had pre-

ceded her—both old servants, and shocked at the appearance of their Maltese subordinates.

“I hope your Ladyship won’t object,” said Mrs Evans, apologetically; “I *couldn’t* get the maids to wear caps—they never do, and indeed everyone tells me the same. It *do* look dreadfully untidy, there’s no denying, but then they wear their hair so funny and they’re so dark and that, I thought your Ladyship would p’raps excuse it. I did take the liberty to give them aprons, for their own wasn’t fit to be seen. And the wages is high, too, very high considering the *sort* of servants they are.”

“Yes, my lady,” broke in old Ford, the confidential man-servant, “I ’ope you won’t think I ’aven’t took no pains with the young men’s liveries. But there! with moustaches and such like, how can they look smart and well set-up?”

Lady Maude tried to soothe their ruffled feelings.

“The look doesn’t matter so much here as in England,” she said; “the chief point is, do they know their work? Have you got a good cook?”

“The best in Valetta, my lady,” replied Mrs Evans, bristling with conscious pride; “he has very good certificates, and they tell me he has always served in the very best ’ouses.”

These important matters settled, Lady Maude proceeded on her tour round the house, which was a very roomy one with plenty of accommodation

for herself and her guests. Margaret had a corner room, with a view over the sea. Mrs Mainwaring's room was next to her, but with a south-east aspect, towards Valetta, so that she should have the morning sun. A balcony ran round two sides of the house, above the verandah, but not on the north or west. Lady Maude loved a balcony, but she loved coolness better than sunshine, and had therefore chosen a sea aspect, leaving the warmer room to her cousin.

The dinner that night was a merry one. Carlo the cook (no one knew if he had a surname or not) certainly proved his capacity, and even Lady Maude, who was very particular, praised his performance, especially when compared with all the tinned food she said she had been consuming during the past week.

"All tinned things taste the same," said Christopher; "they give 'em different names, that is all."

But the rest of the party, who did not care so much about their food, were full of eagerness to explore the country, to do all the sight-seeing, to revel in the warmth and light.

Ethel's cough had almost left her; she declared she felt quite vigorous. She and Margaret would go next morning to St John's. Mr Mainwaring promised to go with them, to act historian, and Dr Masters begged to be allowed to join the party.

They did not, however, start until the afternoon, when Lady Maude said she must do some shopping and would drive Mr and Mrs Mainwaring into Valetta.

Christopher, who had perhaps realised that if he wished to make any impression on Miss Somers he must pay her a little attention, proposed that the boat should be brought to the beach below the garden and that he and Dr Masters should escort her across to the town by water. Margaret was delighted. The day was as hot and cloudless as the preceding one, and the sea looked far more inviting than the dusty roads. Two stalwart Maltese, barefooted, of course, with enormously developed toes—half their rowing seemed to be done by their feet—were in the dghaiso, which was solidly built, rather for strength than speed, but the harbour, as Margaret was to see before long, was not always in a condition of glassy calm, and indeed in strong winds it was impossible to land at Bello Sguardo at all. Though the two men seemed to work well, progress was not very rapid, but there was plenty to look at, and Dr Masters and Margaret chatted away very happily, Christopher, according to his habit, saying little, but occasionally giving utterance to some lazy remark. They landed at the Marsamuscetto steps, and in climbing the steep flight under the tunnel Margaret had her first experience of Maltese beggars. A decrepit-look-

ing old man was crouching up against the wall, and a little boy ran up with outstretched hand pursuing the new-comers.

“Poor *miserably* auld man, give penny, Signora,” and then without a pause, “Poor *miserably*,” etc., etc., all over again. Margaret’s stoical English principles of ‘never give to beggars’ did not somehow seem quite so applicable in the soft South. Certainly the old man did look very ‘*miserably*’ and the boy was in tatters. She could not resist the luxury of getting their thanks at the sacrifice of one penny! Christopher Beaufoy assured her the ‘misery’ was simply their stock in trade, and that she was encouraging the worst vices in assisting beggars, but Dr Masters smiled indulgently and said he wondered what the world would be like if young ladies were not soft-hearted. Margaret, however, felt reprov’d, and hardened herself against an even more wretched specimen of humanity — a veritable old hag — who was whining at the top of the stairs.

Then they turned into the narrow street, passing under the great wooden beams that are built across it and support the houses on both sides, and soon reached Strada Reale, which was full of people, both walking and driving. At the Opera House they were of course beset by the carrozze drivers, touting for fares, but they paid no attention, and

strolled slowly down the hot pavement till they reached the Piazza San Giovanni.

"How curious those black cloaks are!" said Margaret, as they passed two women holding their faldettas round them with one hand, and with the other guiding each a small barefooted urchin with merry black eyes.

"They are hideous things," observed Christopher. "The story is they were put on because of the Turks or something, but *I* believe it was because the women were ashamed of their own ugliness. Did you ever see such frights as they are? It really is a good thing one can see so little of them. Maltese ladies wear them to go to church, but if any other woman puts one on, you know she is up to some mischief."

"They have pleasant faces, I think," said Margaret, ignoring the last part of Mr Beaufoy's speech, "and some of the men are really fine-looking. They seem so strong and lean, as if they could do lots of hard work."

"The children look healthy enough too," remarked Dr Masters. "Ah! here we are, just in time. There is Lady Maude's carriage stopping before the church."

The two parties met at the top of the fine flight of steps, and pushing aside the thick curtain found themselves in the cool dimness of the great church. It was getting too dark to study details, and Lady

Maude walked rapidly round, talking in a rather loud voice to Dr Masters, but Margaret fell a little behind and drank in the solemn beauty, so unlike anything she had previously seen. The nave was almost empty, but here and there, before a side altar, was a kneeling figure shrouded in a faldetta, her lips moving rapidly with a gentle murmur as the beads of her rosary slipped through her fingers, and little children ran in and out, the boys pulling their ragged caps off their little rough heads and all dipping their dirty fingers in the holy water stoup as they made their reverence to the altar. The church was evidently the home of the poor and the little ones.

Under foot was the gorgeous mosaic pavement, memorials to Grand Masters and other great personages among the Knights. On the walls and columns and altars were the trophies of their valour and the signs of their magnificence, now gone for ever; but the Maltese sun still burnt fierce and strong, and Maltese men and women and little children still passed into the shade of the sanctuary for a moment in the midst of their work and play, to adore—if but for a moment—that unseen but Supreme Power in which they still retain an undiminished faith.

CHAPTER IV

BELLO SGUARDO

MR MAINWARING and Ethel went round the church together, but Lady Maude hurried on too fast for any historical disquisition to be possible. Lawrence sighed a little, as the good lady beckoned to them for the third or fourth time, and said to his wife, "It is useless now to attempt any real examination. We will come over alone together another day."

They had hardly closed the church door behind them when Lady Maude exclaimed :

"Why! there is Mrs Thompson and that pretty little boy. I must go across and speak to her"; but Harry had already caught sight of Margaret, and rushing up to her exclaimed :

"When are you going to take me for a walk? You said you would."

Mrs Thompson invited the whole party in to tea, but they were anxious to get home before dark, and it was finally agreed that Margaret should come over to lunch the following day. Harry kept on holding to her hand, and dancing round,

crying out, "to-morrow, to-morrow!" and it was with some difficulty that she disengaged herself.

On returning to Bello Sguardo, Margaret found her first budget of English letters, which she took up to her room and devoured eagerly. There was, of course, a lengthy epistle from her beloved Francie, which made her feel rather homesick ; it contained a great deal of important news, such as who won at the Henbury lawn-tennis tournament, the last of the season, which had been played the very day of Margaret's departure ; also that the Squire of the next parish was to give a birthday dance for his eldest daughter, who was just Francie's age, and that 'schoolroom young ladies' were specially invited—and various other items, equally exciting ; a postscript, written at the last moment in pencil, stated that Harold's dearest friend 'Milner' had just been 'sent down' for the rest of term from Oxford for an escapade in which Harold had also joined, but without being discovered. Harold was very indignant, and had been on the point of giving himself up to the authorities, but Milner had forbidden him to do so, observing (no doubt justly) that it would only make matters worse, and annoy Mr and Mrs Somers without benefiting anyone. Harold declared he would not do a stroke more work, but Francie meant to write and tell him not to be an idiot. If Margaret wrote, she was to be sure and make no allusion to the Oxford

episode, either to her parents or her brother. And so on.

The reading of her letters took some time, especially as she was sitting by the open window, where the scent of the roses was wafted up from the garden, and now and then a steamer or a brown-sailed boat claimed her attention, making its way in or out of the harbour, where lights were beginning to twinkle. Then she sat down to her writing-table and began an answer to Francie, and in this was so absorbed that the dinner-bell startled her, and she had barely time to hurry into her tea-gown before Lady Maude rustled past her door. Fortunately, it was not a very punctual household. Ethel's one fault, in Margaret's eyes, was that she had no idea of time, and her husband was even worse, while Christopher never took the trouble to make haste, under any circumstances. Margaret, who had been brought up under a different regime, often waited twenty minutes *tête-à-tête* with Dr Masters, who was always ready on the stroke of the clock.

At dinner Lady Maude began to discuss Mrs Thompson.

"Funny little woman," she said; "she has no style at all; looks as if he might have picked her up anywhere. He is a good-looking man. How curious it is that these soldiers and sailors so seldom have presentable women."

"It isn't everyone who can dress well," said Ethel, who herself never knew either how to choose or to put on her clothes. "I like Mrs Thompson; she is quite a lady, only rather weak."

"She has too many children," resumed Lady Maude, decisively; "she wears herself out with them. People oughtn't to have such large families. Oh! I forgot, Margaret, you are a large party at home. Well, you all seem to get on all right, but then your mother hasn't got to go wandering round the world after your father. People in the army and navy ought not to marry. Don't you marry an officer, my dear. It is bad for a girl, too; she gets bad style; anyone can tell a garrison lady. Men are so foolish, they encourage that sort of thing, but a nice man doesn't like it all the same. I have known charming girls quite spoilt by Southsea or Dublin, and as to India! they are unbearable when they come home."

When Lady Maude talked, it was unnecessary for any other of the party to exert themselves. Sometimes one or two would hold a murmured conversation under cover of the hostess' cataract of words, but they were generally promptly discovered and ordered to speak out loud. As every properly brought up person has been told in the nursery that whispering is rude, the culprits always felt confounded.

Dr Masters was an admirable listener. His attention never seemed to flag, or at any rate he was always ready with the proper interjections and marks of admiration. This evening Lady Maude had discovered that a former friend and partner of hers was in Malta.

"Sir William Browne he is now," she said; "he was only Captain Browne when I knew him, and he waltzed better than any man I ever danced with. I forget what regiment he was in, but he was never with his regiment—always on the Staff. Except in the Guards, all the best men are never with their regiments. Think," she said, turning to Ethel, "of all the soldiers you have known. You will find nine-tenths were on the Staff if they weren't in the Guards."

"On the staff of whom?" said Ethel, vaguely trying to look interested. "It really isn't any good applying to me, Cousin Maude. I don't know anything about the army. If you ask me some questions about hospitals and doctors!"—she turned smiling to Dr Masters.

"Oh, that reminds me!" exclaimed Lady Maude. "I have just had an account of a most wonderful cure—pure electricity. I will show you all about it. You might take it up, Dr Masters, and make your fortune and beat the Mattei system all to fits."

At this Christopher giggled. "You are getting

quite modern in your language, mother," he said.

Lady Maude bridled, and returned to the subject of Sir William Browne. "You ought to know him, Ethel," she said, "for I know he is a friend of your father's. He was K.C.B.'d for something in India and he is rather famous, but he has only just married again, quite a young woman, and a nobody in particular. It is wonderful how foolish distinguished men very often are!"

"Perhaps she is very nice," suggested Ethel.

"Oh, perhaps, but he ought to have thought of his position. Now my opinion is that a wife is very much in the way to a man when he is young and wants to get on in his profession, at least if he is in the army or navy, but when he has risen to the higher ranks, *then* he ought to marry a woman of position and some means, who can be a good hostess and bring him good connections." She looked round the table for approval.

"I fear," said Dr Masters, conventionally, "that we are not all governed by dictates of prudence."

"It is very hard to say people should not marry when they are young," remarked Ethel. "They often might do so if they were not so afraid of giving up some luxuries and submitting to some sacrifices."

"A man shrinks from imposing sacrifices on a woman," said Dr Masters.

"And still more on himself," retorted Ethel.

"My dear child," exclaimed Lady Maude, "don't put fantastical ideas into our two young people's heads."

Christopher half rose and made a mocking bow to Margaret, who almost wished at the moment that she could throttle Lady Maude, but that good lady was quite unconscious of the effect her words had produced, and sipped her ice with undiminished satisfaction. When dinner came to an end at last, Margaret drew Ethel on to the terrace for a few moments' refreshment.

"What *dreadful* things Lady Maude does say!" she gasped. "I didn't know which way to look."

"The only thing to do is to laugh," said Ethel. "She doesn't mean anything. You must harden yourself a little."

"Mrs Mainwaring," said Dr Masters' gentle voice, "may I remind you that there is a heavy dew to-night? Your husband is getting anxious! I think he is right. You should come in."

With a half sigh Ethel obeyed. Perhaps the constant pressure of delicate health is felt most in these small reminders, in these slight denials of harmless pleasures. They seem little to spectators, but they are often harder to bear than the great

sacrifices made once and for ever. Ethel accepted the necessity for care as a duty, galling, perhaps, but not to be shirked.

"Now I have married Lawrence," she said one day to Margaret, "I am bound to try and prolong my life. If I had left myself free, I don't know what I should have done."

"But you *want* to prolong it, don't you?" asked Margaret, awestruck.

"*Now* I do—yes, indeed. That is the fetter I have put upon myself. Without Lawrence I should have had so few inducements to live as an invalid. But now I can't bear to go and leave him behind! Sometimes I feel impelled to hold forth to you, I don't know why, and warn you of the terrible responsibilities of marriage, and perhaps still more of motherhood, only, on the other hand, I never believe that advice does much good. It is one of the cruel laws of Nature that each one has to buy his own experience. Though I am so perfectly happy with Lawrence, I agree with the old maid who wondered how any woman could ever trust herself so entirely to a man as to marry him! And as to bringing up children—I do almost believe that one day we women shall be evolved up to the point of declining the responsibility altogether."

Margaret smiled inwardly at the thought of what her mother would say to such doctrines, and gently

rallied Ethel on the difference between her theories and her practice.

“Quite true,” said Ethel. “I am a broken reed to lean upon. Go and buy your own experience, poor child. I am afraid, somehow, it will cost you a good many tears.”

CHAPTER V

A CLUB DANCE

MARGARET'S visit to Mrs Thompson was the prelude to many others, and very often Arthur Gordon was present at lunch, or tea, or appeared to escort them to the Marsa to watch a scratch game of polo, blues against reds, in which he was not one of the worst players. Valetta was rapidly filling now. Officers had returned to their regiments from leave, the Fleet was assembling by twos and threes, till there was hardly a vacant buoy in the harbour, and visitors in search of health or amusement were occupying the hotels and lodging-houses. The weather had changed, not once, but many times : indeed it seemed always changing, and generally blowing a gale. When the first terrific thunderstorm was over, during which the rain fell in sheets, hiding all view of the sea from the inhabitants of Bello Sguardo, the whole country and town looked as clean as children fresh from the bath ; a fresh north wind blew, people put on warm clothes and moved

briskly, and even a few luxurious folk lighted fires. But there were alternations of sirocco, when headaches were the order of the day, and when all persons inclined to ill-temper had an excuse ready to hand; and there were also the still more dreaded gregales, blowing hard from the north-east, and raising great waves in the harbour that usually looked so calm and bright. Through all but the very worst weather the amusements went on. The Marsa was often too wet for polo, but there were always the Wednesdays and Saturdays at the Opera, and plenty of teas, dances, concerts and bazaars, to say nothing of an occasional party at the Palace. People said it was a very gay season. Both the Admiral, Sir Godfrey Latham, and the General, Sir William Browne, did their duty in seconding the Governor's hospitality; and as everybody knew everybody else (at least among the English), the society was bright and free from stiffness. The ladies laughed over their household difficulties, instead of uttering dismal groans, as in England; the men grumbled less than usual over their uniforms, and both sexes had plenty of opportunity for flirtation. Money seemed to go a long way. People who in England looked twice at their butcher's book owned a cart and pair of ponies, drove to tandem meets and rode in races, subscribed gaily for their box in the Opera and their ticket at the Club dances, and

consulted earnestly as to the costume they should wear at the Carnival Ball.

Naturally Margaret was well amused. Lady Maude was enchanted at such a good excuse for going to all the dances and evening parties, and there was no want of youthful chaperons, should the elderly ones fail. There was, of course, plenty of gossip, some good-natured, some very much the reverse. Margaret did not hear a great deal, except when Lady Maude, who absorbed everything, let it out again through her conversational sieve; but there was one couple upon whom all eyes were fixed long before Christmas. The lady was the wife of Sir William Browne and the man was a Russian, Count Bartoloff. The very presence of a Russian Count at Malta suggested all kinds of wild stories, and when he became a devoted friend of Sir William and Lady Browne, many people were informed, on the best authority, that he was a near relation of the Czar and a spy, sent to report on all the weak places in the Malta defences. Sir William Browne, who was many years older than my lady, appeared to regard the intimacy with perfect complacency. Count Bartoloff was mounted on one of his best chargers at the Reviews, was to be seen at all their parties, and was constantly in their box at the Opera. Lady Maude Beaufoy tossed up her nose and sniffed a possible *dénouement* other than political.

Ethel maintained that such very open devotion could have no *double entendre*. Margaret, dancing with her partners, watched Count Bartoloff and Lady Browne gliding through vales and polkas in exquisite harmony and content.

One evening at a Club dance Arthur Gordon met Margaret at the top of the stairs, and claiming a previously promised waltz, took her into the ball-room, where dancing was already in full swing. As they paused after their first turn together, they found themselves immediately opposite the Russian and Lady Browne, who were as usual talking and laughing together.

Suddenly Gordon turned to Margaret and said, "Do you know that fellow?"

"I have just spoken to him, and that is all," she said. "He has not cared to pursue my acquaintance."

"Well, you aren't sorry, are you?" retorted Gordon. "He don't look very desirable."

"Why not?" she said, "because he is a foreigner? But you forget I never see any foreigners at home, and it amuses me to know some here."

"I don't like the looks of him," persisted Gordon, doggedly. "A man has no business to make a woman conspicuous in the way he is doing."

"I don't fancy many men trouble themselves about that view of the question," said Margaret.

She took the whole thing very lightly, and was

only amused, when, later in the evening, Count Bartoloff came up to her and asked her if she had a dance to spare for him. It so happened that she had one vacancy for a set of lancers, and she gave it to him. He was a tall, handsome man, who looked as if he lived in uniform, though his plain clothes were of the latest cut and fitted him perfectly. He spoke English like a native.

"I learned it in the nursery," he said with a bow, when Margaret complimented him.

After the lancers, which he danced carefully and gracefully, shrugging his shoulders over the antics of some young and energetic performers, he took her in to supper, and there she was found half-an-hour later by two indignant young Highlanders whose dances she had entirely forgotten. Count Bartoloff was a most fascinating person. He assured her that so far from being a Government spy, he was very nearly a Nihilist in his convictions and sympathies.

"England is my admiration," he said. "There freedom and justice are combined. You have order, you have stability, a King you love, a law you respect. But with us, if you go among the peasants, the poor people, what do you find? Want and ignorance. Then you think you must pull it all down to build it up better. It is rotten, all of it."

And so he went on, pouring out enthusiastic dreams into the girl's ear, flattering her immensely

by choosing such subjects for conversation rather than the trite commonplaces she heard every day, and making her wonder if he talked like this to Lady Browne, and think with shame of the ill-natured remarks she had heard about him. Arthur Gordon was to have danced once more with her, but when at length Count Bartoloff left her, he was nowhere to be seen, and Margaret, rather piqued, asked to go home.

On this occasion Ethel Mainwaring was her chaperon, Lady Maude having been invited to dinner at the Palace, with her son. Ethel had never before taken Margaret out in the evening, but had been allowed to do so this time as a special favour, the weather being mild and calm. No one, however, could have been a worse chaperon. She had been occupied most of the evening in listening to elderly ladies' accounts of their various diseases, and had had no idea of what Margaret was doing. Ethel was a great favourite among ladies of a certain age. They knew she had a considerable amount of medical knowledge, and this, combined with her gentle, sympathetic manner, gave them an irresistible impulse to unburden themselves of all their physical woes, and very often of their mental ones also. She had therefore hardly seen Margaret from the beginning to the end of the dance, but the moment they were seated together in the carriage and driving back to Bello Sguardo, she

perceived that something had a little excited her companion.

"Did you have a pleasant dance?" she asked, at once. "Why did you want to come away?"

"Oh!" said Margaret, with a slight hesitation, "it was well enough up to then, but I saw there was no one left I cared to dance with, so I thought we might as well come to bed."

"Oh!" said Ethel, waiting for more. It so happened that Arthur Gordon had said good-night to her on his way out; she knew, therefore, that he had left some time before they did, and she put two and two together. It was not of him, however, that Margaret wanted to talk.

"Did you see the Russian Count, Ethel?" she said, presently.

"That tall, handsome man who was dancing with Lady Browne when we came in?"

"Yes. He danced with me afterwards."

"Oh! is it the first time?"

"Yes. I thought he had forgotten me—we had been introduced once,—but he came straight up to me this evening and we danced first and sat out afterwards. He is rather a nice change from all the soldiers and sailors," she added, a little defiantly.

Ethel laughed. "What do you want me to say?" she said. "I haven't the pleasure of knowing the Count. He may be very delightful, though, from

what Maude and Christopher say, I should think he has not been very wise. But I believe you want me to warn you solemnly against him, in order that you may prove your superior sagacity by acting contrary to my advice."

Margaret laughed too. "I think people are very ill-natured," she said, presently.

"So do I," said Ethel. "At the same time, in my small experience, there is generally some slight substratum of truth in every scandal. It is better to be careful about people whose antecedents are unknown."

"Well, I am certain that you could not help liking him if he talked to you as he talked to me to-night, all about the poor Russian peasants and their sufferings," replied Margaret, eagerly.

"Ah!" said Ethel, slowly. "You see the misfortune is that fine, dashing young men are not in the habit of making me their confidante. They prefer pretty girls, and it is the old men and women who come and tell me about their gout and their headaches instead."

"I am sure that isn't true," cried Margaret, nestling up against her. "Anyhow, the young women tell you everything, even about their partners."

CHAPTER VI

ISABEL

A FEW months before the opening of our story, one warm evening in July, a rather fagged-looking young lady was mounting the staircase of a house in Eccleston Square. She was followed by her mother, who, noticing the girl's flagging footsteps, said rather anxiously :

"You look tired, Isabel. You had better stay in bed to-morrow till lunch ; as it is Sunday there are no morning engagements."

"Oh yes, there are," the girl replied. "Cissie Hall asked me to walk in the park with her after church, to meet that Mr Beaufoy who took me in to dinner the other day. He seemed horribly dull, but he is very rich, and his mother is Lady something or other, so I may as well cultivate him. Not that it is likely to be any use," she added in an undertone, seating herself in front of her looking-glass and sighing. The party had been a failure, and Miss Jarvis was weary, but not quite ready to own *herself* beaten yet.

"Well, you needn't go to church, at any rate; you can take your prayer-book into the park with you, and that will do just as well."

"Oh, mother! how you fuss!" said Isabel, impatiently. "I tell you I want to go to church. I want to see who is still in town, and then I want to look at the hats. I don't believe Julie has trimmed my new one properly, and one always sees the very best styles at St Mark's. Besides, Canon Curteis is going to preach. Everyone is talking about him, and one feels such a fool not to have heard him. Good-night. Tell Julie to call me at ten."

Mrs Jarvis closed the door and retired to her own room, to meditate on how she could possibly make the world more pleasant for her idolised daughter. She could not double her somewhat narrow income; she could not give herself a title or make her house the centre of a distinguished and brilliant society. As it was, she did all she could. She took Isabel to every party to which they were invited, she left cards at every house with which they had the faintest semblance of connection, she had seats in the most fashionable church in Belgravia, she went with her daughter to all the best race-meetings, she asked all the eligible young men of their acquaintance to lunch, she took pains to make herself useful to any great lady she might come across. There was hardly

any humiliation to which she was not ready to stoop for Isabel's sake, and yet the young lady was discontented and was perpetually grumbling.

One day she had said to her mother, "I wish you would join a few charitable committees. It is such a good way of getting to know people. I was looking through some lists of Societies, and I see that Lady Garnet belongs to the G.F.S., and Lady Harrow to the M.W.P.S. I believe there are branches of both in this parish, so you might easily get on them."

So poor Mrs Jarvis, without the faintest desire to befriend girls or to protect married women, immediately laid aside some of her few extra sovereigns, announced her intention of subscribing to the two societies, and eventually, by really hard work and constant attendance on the local committees had been elected on to the Central Council of that one which owned Lady Harrow as President. Cards were exchanged, and even an invitation to an occasional party sent by the great lady, but no intimacy resulted therefrom, and disappointment and heartburning were the only result. Isabel always thought it was her mother's fault when her inspirations thus failed to produce their intended result, and perhaps it was. Mrs Jarvis was not striking or brilliant in any way. She was not intended by Nature to push herself into prominence, and nowadays social success

can hardly be won without daring and originality. Isabel had some of both, but she felt herself severely handicapped by her insignificant mother.

On this July Sunday, however, she returned from the park in a very cheerful frame of mind. Mr Christopher Beaufoy had not required to be re-introduced to her, and had been at her side all the time. She had learnt from him that he was going to Goodwood and Cowes, then up to Scotland to shoot, afterwards to his place near Henbury, and finally to Malta for the winter. Immediately a happy idea came into her head, and she exclaimed :

"Oh, do tell me about the Malta climate. My mother had such bad colds all last winter that I want to get her out of England in the autumn. Do you think Malta would be a good place to go to? It would be more amusing than the Riviera, wouldn't it?"

"Depends what you want," replied Christopher. "It is my mother's fancy to go to Malta. I have an idea myself it is a second-rate kind of place, but if I get bored I shall go on to Egypt or Algiers or somewhere. There are lots of dances, I believe, if you like that sort of thing. Can't say I do."

"One gets too much of it in London, doesn't one?" said Isabel, who had stood for two hours by her mother's chair, a day or two previously at Lady Harrow's, watching with bitter envy the favoured

girls being claimed by their partners, and waiting for her own turn which never came.

"Never go to balls," said Mr Beaufoy. "Stopped when I was fourteen, mean to take to it again when I am forty."

They both laughed at this piece of wit, and Isabel secretly determined on Malta for the winter. She found her mother, as usual, quite amenable, but financial considerations made it necessary to let the house in Eccleston Square before the move could be made, and it was not till near the end of the year that Mrs and Miss Jarvis established themselves in a flat in Strada Mezzodi, Valetta. One or two introductions had been obtained, and in that easy-going society it is not difficult to get invitations to a few evening entertainments, and the ball once set rolling gathers force and velocity as it proceeds.

Isabel could dress well and dance well, she was clever with her fingers and rather good at acting, and was soon having a very 'good time,' while the patient mother was only too thankful to see her daughter in good spirits. There was less chaperonage, too, required than in London, or, at any rate, there was less practised. The young officers took charge of their young lady friends for a long ride or drive *tête-à-tête*, and if sometimes there were rumours that surreptitious embraces had been exchanged—why! no one, after all, was the wiser.

Isabel had not forgotten that Mr Beaufoy was the original object of her mission, and though the charms of epaulettes or red coats sometimes threw that object for a moment into the shade, she always returned to it afterwards with pangs of remorse. Mr Beaufoy, however, was not very easy to catch. He divided his time largely between his own house and the Club, and to neither place could Isabel penetrate. He did not dance, though he occasionally lounged into a ball-room to look on for half-an-hour. He did not ride, and when he went to the Marsa he did not patronise the Grand Stand or the tea, but wandered about the ground itself, watching the starts and finishes. Moreover, he was reported to be in love with Miss Somers, either because she was staying in the same house, or because of some hint his mother had dropped, for certainly his attentions to her in public were anything but marked. Indeed, Margaret's anxiety on this very subject had been long quieted, and she felt rather ashamed of her previous fears. She thought, too, that Christopher improved on acquaintance, when once you had accustomed yourself to his lazy manner and general want of manliness. At any rate, she had no complaint to make of his treatment of her, and she liked his evident affection for his mother, and the amiable way in which he fell in with her wishes.

Fortune, however, favoured Miss Jarvis at last, for one afternoon she was walking down Strada

Reale, when, just as she reached the Club, Christopher Beaufoy lounged down the steps. At first he did not appear to recognise her, but her very pointed bow and pause compelled him to raise his hat, and as Isabel deliberately waited for him to come down to her, he was obliged to speak.

"You see I took your advice," she said, gaily, "and brought my mother to Malta. I am so glad I did, for it is suiting her wonderfully. Will you come and see her? I don't think you have ever met. She is at home, I know, for we are expecting the new Prima Donna in to tea."

Christopher knew well enough that he had given Miss Jarvis no advice about Malta or any other subject, and he regarded her remark as an unintentional danger-signal. A young man with a prospective £30,000 a year quickly learns to appreciate such danger-signals, but he was incurably lazy, and just now it was the easiest thing to submit to Isabel's leading. He turned down Strada Mezzodi with her, and so, all unknowning, the die of his future was cast.

The new Prima Donna—'the little Signorina,' as her friends called her—was sipping something that was not tea by the fire in Mrs Jarvis' rooms, and two or three men were there, talking very bad French, or trying to understand her equally broken English. She was very little and very dark, with narrow eyes and arched eyebrows, and a round,

good-tempered mouth. A native of Calabria, she had received her artistic training in Naples, and had now come over to Malta to try her fortunes for the first time among strangers. Her salary was modest in the extreme, and it was a wonder how she managed to live, and still more to sing with a brilliancy and vigour that would have been surprising under any circumstances, considering the smallness of her frame. All Malta society was beginning to rave about her, and Miss Jarvis, with true genius, had made friends with her just before she became fashionable. The Signorina went about with her very ugly and elderly chaperon, and was understood to be a model of virtue, but meanwhile she was receiving her meed of homage with apparent satisfaction.

Christopher Beaufoy shook hands languidly with his hostess, sank into the nearest arm-chair and watched the rival services—for a soldier and a sailor were there—vieing with each other who could talk the worst French. At a favourable opportunity he said a few words, and Signorina Bianchi, immediately attracted by the different pronunciation, turned smilingly to him, and he found the ball at his feet. The other men first subsided, and then went to the further side of the room to flirt with Isabel, leaving Christopher and the Signorina *tête-à-tête*. He found her smile charming when directed to him, and her

conversation piquant, and was, in short, made a victim on the spot, a result that was not at all what Miss Jarvis had intended when she invited him in. Moreover, she was simply consumed with envy when she actually heard him inviting the little actress out to Bello Sguardo. The Signorina, however, shook her head and smiled mournfully.

"*Pas permis*," she said, "I am a prisoner here by the terms of my engagement. I must not leave Valetta. Ah! you do not know what I suffer when the sun shines and the crowds go out to the Marsa. Always the same walk—the same things to see! I could tell you the contents of all the shop windows in Strada Reale."

"But what monstrous tyranny! Why?" asked Beaufoy.

"*Qu'en sais-je?*" She shrugged her shoulders. "Someone caught cold once, and we are all *en pénitence*! It is the rule."

"I will get permission for you to come out to lunch one day, shall I?" said he.

"Ah! one day when I do not sing! That would be charming. But I must go, or my aunt will scold. You come to hear me sing to-morrow? No? Ah! I forgot it is what you call a black night. *Tenez!* I am black, am I not?"

Laughing and shrugging her shoulders, she ran downstairs before Christopher had made up his mind to offer to escort her home. A *carrozze*,

however, was waiting for her, with her maid inside, and she drew the curtains close to protect herself from the night air.

“They have no wit, these English,” she sighed to herself. “Their black nights, as they call them, are, after all, the nights in which to sing. The Maltese do not talk through the music; they listen, and they applaud. The English go to see the dresses and to laugh. And yet they are very rich, and they are generous too,” and the little Signorina sighed once more.

CHAPTER VII

MARGARET'S ADMIRERS

LITTLE Harry Thompson continued to claim a certain amount of Margaret's time as his right. As Christmas drew near, the shops, even in Valetta, where the art of decorating shop-windows is not very far advanced, began to look attractive to children, and one day, about a week before Christmas, Harry begged for an expedition down Strada Reale, in order to examine to his heart's content the treasures for which he sighed.

"I've got some secrets, too," he remarked ; "can you keep secrets, Summie?" He had invented this pet name for Miss Somers, much to his own satisfaction. Margaret promised to be discreet, and he went dancing down the street holding on to her hand and continuing the fascinating topic. "I think secrets is vewy nice ; only me and you'll know. Father don't know nothing, nor mother, nor no one, only me and you!"

"What's that?" said a cheery voice just behind. "Holloa, Harry, how are you? Doing Christmas

shopping with Miss Somers? How jolly!" and Arthur Gordon looked as if he meant what he said.

It was a few days after the Club dance, and they had not met since. The young fellow had kept away from Bello Sguardo, first of all from a sense of annoyance with Margaret, and then because he had suddenly woke up to the comprehension of what such a foolish sense of annoyance might spring from. But he refused to believe that he was in love. What was the good of being in love when he could not marry? He thought Miss Somers was an awfully nice girl, a girl it did any fellow good to know ; and, at any rate, all subtleties vanished the moment he saw her. He had been going towards the Club, but he forgot his destination and escorted Margaret and her charge along the opposite side of the street. Harry did not allow much conversation between them. He talked all the time, with constant questions demanding answers. Some toy windmills and engines were working, and Mr Gordon had to explain how the wheels went round, and finally, rather to Margaret's horror, he bought the child a locomotive, promising to come in one evening and run it for him.

"We are talking of having a children's party on board on New Year's Day," he said ; "it will be great sport. Do you think you would be able to come and help us look after the young 'uns?"

"I should like to come very much," said Margaret. "I will ask Lady Maude."

"Will you be at home by tea-time to-night?" he asked a little later, while Harry was absorbed in comparing the merits as regards shrillness of several whistles presented him for choice.

Margaret said she thought so.

"Then I will call and bring Lady Maude a formal invitation," said Gordon, and went off to his Club.

"Now he's gone at last," said Harry, looking round with satisfaction. "You and me alone is much the best. He will talk so."

Then the solemn process of choosing presents for father, mother, nurse, two sisters, and a brother went on, with sore temptations to spend some of the available pennies on himself instead. It was rather a curious assortment when completed—some soldiers for his father, because he was a soldier; a doll for the nurse, because she liked babies; a whistle for his brother (if he could ever make up his mind to part with it himself); a woolly sheep that squeaked for his mother, and so on.

"Now I've got to get something for you," he said. "You mustn't look. Hide your eyes."

So Margaret turned away to the door, while an excited conversation, which she was supposed not to hear, went on between Harry and the shopman. At last a little trumpet was chosen and packed,

and Harry eagerly asked whether Margaret had seen anything. But the payment was a difficulty. Harry's purchases were too extensive for his purse. Fortunately Margaret had hers, and two or three small coins from it set matters straight. At length Harry was safely delivered to his natural guardians, and Margaret, pursued down the stairs with shrill whispers 'not to tell,' went into the drawing-room, where Mrs Thompson wished to keep her to tea. Margaret, however, said she ought to be back before dark, and besides—she had promised to be in by tea-time! So she jumped into a carozze and was off.

There were visitors at Bello Sguardo when she arrived; the Colonel from the nearest barracks, a gay bachelor, had brought two newly-arrived subalterns to present them to Lady Maude. One was very tall, red, and shy, with a lisp and an innocent baby face; the other rather short and dark, but strikingly good-looking and apparently at home in any society. Lady Maude kept the Colonel amused; Margaret was occupied with Mr Lang and Mr Huish, when the door opened once more and Arthur Gordon walked in. Lady Maude was always cordial to young men. She told him he was a stranger and deserved no tea, but she let him claim a cup from Margaret, and continued her own *tête-à-tête* with Colonel Morrison.

Gordon was in a good temper again with Margaret, and therefore with all the world. He even set himself to bring Mr Lang into the conversation, and waited calmly for the three soldiers to depart. So long as he was not jealous, he liked to see Margaret's pretty little head move quickly from side to side as she spoke, now to one, now to another, to watch her flashing smile, and to notice how her quick repartee kept the ball of talk rolling, leaving no awkward pauses.

Presently Ethel and her husband came in. Mrs Mainwaring was poorly, with neuralgia and other miseries, and Gordon fetched her an easy-chair a little apart and sat down by her. Lawrence stood behind, close to the window, with a book in his hand, and, as usual, in a state of complete abstraction. He had a vague recollection of having seen Gordon before, whenever they met, and the young sailor treated him with great politeness, regarding him in the light of some strange antediluvian creature, who probably had a use, though it was hard to discover what.

On this occasion Gordon supplied him with tea and cake, which he absorbed silently and automatically, but after ten minutes' contemplation of his empty plate, he said quite suddenly:

"Do you understand the Maltese language?"

"I?" said Gordon. "Not a word, I'm afraid.

I am not very good at languages, and I believe it's the most extraordinary lingo."

"Ah!" said Mr Mainwaring, and relapsed into silence.

"My husband is studying it," said Ethel, in explanation. "He is using his time here by studying as many sides of Malta as possible—the ethnology of the Maltese especially, and for that purpose he wants to be able to talk to the people. But there seem to be very few books written in Maltese."

"I am ashamed to say I know nothing about it," replied the sailor. "We naval fellows get into the habit of making ourselves understood somehow wherever we go, but very few of us ever get to know anything about the natives, except where there is some sport to be got, and, of course, there is none here."

"How unfairly things are arranged!" smiled Ethel. "Here is my husband, who would give anything for your opportunities, and you neglect them!"

"Oh, well!" said Gordon, rather on the defensive, "perhaps we are some good in other ways, and Mr Mainwaring might not care to be all night on the bridge when it is blowing a gale of wind!"

He cast a sidelong glance at the tea-table as he spoke, and met Margaret's eyes. She had heard the last two or three sentences, and was smiling.

Mr Huish chimed in, also in support of Gordon. He had never heard of anyone taking the trouble to learn Maltese. The only thing to do in Malta was to get as much fun as possible, dance, play polo and ride to picnics. In such a fashion only was exile from Aldershot or Hyde Park made tolerable.

At this moment the Colonel rose, and the sub-alterns took their departure with him, but the door which let them out admitted at the same time no less a person than the Russian Count. He had met Lady Maude, of course, and though he had called at Bello Sguardo before, this was the first time that he had found the ladies at home. Margaret offered him tea, but he declined gracefully.

"Your English tea is too strong for me," he said.

He did not linger by her, but talked first to Lady Maude and then to Mr Mainwaring, to whom he supplied much useful information as to book-sellers and even as to teachers of Maltese.

"There are no Professors here," he said, with a deprecating smile, "but there are ladies. Ladies teach the best. They know by practice, not by science, but you have the satisfaction of making the science afterwards. That is the best way of learning; do you not think so?" he asked Ethel.

"Do you think women can never be scientific?" she asked.

"That is a hard question," he replied, with another smile. "I do not think science is their *métier*, but they must try it, like bicycling, shooting, and all other occupations of men. We shall have an army of Amazons before this century is finished."

"Let us hope there will be no need of armies," retorted Ethel.

"Ah!" said the Count, quickly, "I see you are a Progressist. You believe in the perfectibility of human nature. That was the creed of the nineteenth century, of what you call the Victorian era, but it is passing away, and now we are already several years in the new century ; it is our creed no more."

"What the next creed will be," said Lawrence, in his calm, unimpassioned voice, "it is quite impossible to foretell. It is better to examine facts that are within our grasp rather than to speculate vainly about the future."

"How can people have a creed at all," said Margaret aside to Arthur Gordon, "unless they believe it to be true, not only now but always?"

"These scientific people don't believe anything, do they?" he replied, in the same low tone.

"Except in the power of their own intellects," she answered.

But Lady Maude did not approve of abstract discussions. She had been reading a note that had been brought to her, but as soon as her atten-

tion was free, she began to ask Count Bartoloff many questions as to the intended length of his stay on the Island, his general impressions, etc. The Count was discreet. He said he had made no plans. He did not intend to return to Russia, and he found Malta charming. He might stay till the hot weather came, or he might go on to Egypt. He was a bachelor—alone—and he was quite independent. Lady Maude buzzed on about the society—the Governor, the Admiral, the General, but the Count would not be drawn. He found them all delightful, without exception.

At last Arthur Gordon rose. He had to return to his ship, but he was not dissatisfied with his afternoon. Margaret had been very friendly, had seemed glad to see him, and had promised to come on board the Flag-ship to the children's party. Before that, he should meet her again; and at any rate she had not shown any special favour either to the young cubs of soldiers nor to that Russian fellow. As he turned the corner out of the drive into the high road, he almost ran up in the dark against Dr Masters, who was coming in.

"Holloa, Gordon! You have been here again? Take care! You will find yourself warned off the premises before long."

"What on earth do you mean?" cried Gordon, who did not like being chaffed at this moment.

"Oh, nothing!" said the doctor, good-humouredly,

"it is no good warning the moth not to fly into the candle, and where there are attractive young ladies there will always be young men, I suppose," and with a little laugh he passed on into the darkness.

Gordon felt very indignant, but during his hour's brisk walk down to the Calcara landing he had time to turn the whole matter over in his mind, and to come to the serious and alarming conclusion that he did care for Margaret Somers a good deal more than he had intended to do at first, that if not actually in love at present, he was on the high road to that very dangerous condition, and that he had already reached the stage when he felt he could not contemplate the possibility of her falling in love with any other man. That she should care for him was quite another matter. He did not wish to try and make her do so. She had plenty of admirers, and so long as she was not made unhappy, it could hurt no one if he chose to go on seeing her. Besides, there was 'that Count' hanging about. He had already nearly ruined Lady Browne's reputation, and even such a girl as Margaret might need protection. There were only three or four months more in which to enjoy himself in her society. Let the future take care of itself! with which gallant resolution he passed through the Calcara gateway, ran down the hill and hailed a dghaiso that was waiting near the steps. It was a still, mild evening. The harbour

was crowded with ships—not a buoy was vacant. The twinkling lights of gliding dhaisos crossed and recrossed on every side, while each man-of-war was a focus of light, that shone in trembling reflections from the innumerable cabin lamps. One ship was flashing her search-light round, illuminating now the grim walls and towers of the Baracca and the Floriana fortifications, now the mass of buildings on the Vittoriosa side, or the narrow space by Fort St Elmo, where the blackness swallowed up the harbour mouth. Strange guttural cries from the boatmen mingled with the crack of distant fireworks where some local festa was being celebrated in approved Maltese style, and with the very loud and strident voice of a youth who was singing an Ave Maria somewhere close by, in the nasal sing-song fashion of some Moslem muezzin ancestor calling to prayer from the top of a minaret.

Gordon saw and heard with his bodily senses.

"After all, Malta isn't such a bad place," he said to himself. But he was really thinking of the drawing-room at Bello Sguardo.

CHAPTER VIII

A SOCIALIST

AN addition to the party at Bello Sguardo arrived on Christmas Eve in the person of Miss Sophy Mainwaring, who was Lawrence's sister, but by no means remarkable only on that account. Lady Maude, hearing that she intended to occupy her Christmas vacation with a trip to Malta, partly in order to see her brother, and partly for the benefit of the sea voyage, had hospitably offered her the use of a spare room until the arrival of Canon Curteis.

Miss Mainwaring was professor of physics at a Ladies' College; she was ten years older than Lawrence, had brought him up from delicate childhood with infinite devotion, had imparted to him a large proportion of the knowledge he possessed, and had only resigned the care of him to Ethel after fierce internal struggles. But she had made the renunciation once and for all, and taken her sister-in-law to her heart with an old maid's unselfishness.

It would have been difficult to find two more naturally antagonistic persons than Lady Maude and her new guest, whose whole appearance was suggestive of the 'woman's movement,'—from her close felt hat and spectacled eyes, down to her 'rational' skirts and 'hygienic' boots,—and whose voice itself, clear and masterful, seemed more accustomed to lecture to an attentive audience, or to arouse a careless pupil, than to carry on an ordinary drawing-room conversation.

The first passage at arms occurred on the very evening after her arrival, as the party were about to separate for the night.

"Let me know if you all have plans for to-morrow," said Lady Maude. "I am going to church, and I have ordered the carriage at half-past ten. Who is coming with me?"

"I am, please," said Margaret.

"I shall not let Ethel go," said Lawrence, "she got too tired last time she went to church."

"Do you go to church, Ethel?" exclaimed Miss Mainwaring, in an astonished voice.

"Sometimes," said Ethel, rather faintly.

"What the good is of pretending to believe what one doesn't, I never could see," retorted her sister-in-law. "I *never* go to church, but I should like a lift in your carriage, if you please, Lady Maude, if you are going into Valetta."

"You must get out at Porta Reale, then," said

Lady Maude, in a tone of unusual acerbity. "Dr Masters, I presume you are coming?"

The doctor bowed.

"He knows better than to quarrel with his bread and butter," muttered Miss Mainwaring to herself.

"Christopher, will you come?" asked his mother.

"I daresay I shall join you in church," he replied, "but I am going into Valetta earlier."

Lady Maude looked surprised, but made no comment. When, however, her son was absent from the nine o'clock breakfast the following morning, she enquired where he was. The butler replied that Mr Beaufoy had left the house on foot half-an-hour previously, and Lady Maude was much mystified. She would have been greatly astonished could she have seen him standing by one of the pillars in St John's Church, apparently attending to the service with great care, and really watching a little quietly-dressed kneeling figure, waiting till she moved, and then following her closely, so as to hold back the great leathern curtain as she passed out. The lady's smiling little mouth tried to pout, but gave up the attempt, and the dark eyes were lifted to his with fascinating reluctance. The 'little Signorina' was with her maid, and allowed Christopher to accompany her down the Strada San Giovanni.

"My aunt went to the great Midnight Mass at Citta Vecchia," she said, "so she is resting. This

does not seem like Christmas to me. There is no Presepio anywhere, not even in the churches. At home we always have one. We walk in procession, carrying candles, and the youngest has the charge of the Bambino. I remember well how I walked one year, when I was very little, carrying the Bambino in my arms, and then how I placed it in the cradle, with the Holy Mother and St Joseph kneeling by. Ah! it was beautiful! But why do I talk to you about such things? You are a heretic. *Allez-vous en*. You must come no further. My aunt can see round the corner. Her two eyes do not look straight," and with a whisk of her skirt and a little wave of her hand, Signorina Bianchi was off, and Mr Beaufoy was left to his own devices.

Somehow the English Church did not seem very attractive just then; the club, a cigar, with a whiskey and soda was more in tune with his feelings, so he went and refreshed himself, and thought what a delicious little creature his new friend was, wondered whether he liked her or Margaret Somers best, how Margaret would look on the stage, and how the Signorina would behave as mistress of an English household. Then he laughed, not very pleasantly, found it was half-past eleven, tossed away the remainder of his cigar, and sauntered down to the church, where his mother, as became her dignity, had taken a

pew for the season. Lady Maude, Dr Masters and Margaret were the only occupants this morning, and Christopher intended to slip in beside them under cover of a hymn. As he walked up the aisle, however, he was conscious of being followed by a light footstep, and when he reached the pew found that Isabel Jarvis was just behind him.

"Have you a spare seat?" she whispered.

He nodded and let her pass in. The next thing was that she had no hymn-book. Christopher pushed one to her, but she wished him to share it. This he declined, though Isabel had a pretty voice and sang true. She had also a pretty white hand, for it was warm in church, and she had taken off her glove. Alas! Christopher was blind and deaf, but he could not prevent Miss Jarvis from staying close beside him when they left the church, and asking audibly to be introduced to Lady Maude. In fact, she hardly waited for the formal words, but began at once apologies for having intruded herself into the pew.

"The church was full," she said, "and I hate going into strangers' seats, so I asked Mr Beaufoy to take compassion on me. I hope, Lady Maude, as you live such a long way out, that you will make use of our house at any time, if it would be a convenience to you. We are close by here."

Lady Maude made a civil reply, and she and

her party started off on their return drive to Bello Sguardo. It was a beautiful day, mild and sunny, and even Lady Maude's indignant comments on Miss Jarvis' 'vulgar, pushing ways,' and Christopher's amused encouragement of his mother's anger, could not destroy the sense which Margaret felt of 'peace and goodwill' in the pleasant southern air. This physical content was, however, rudely broken in upon as soon as they reached the house. Mr Mainwaring greeted Dr Masters with a request that he would immediately come and see his wife, who had been taken ill.

The doctor was some time in Ethel's room, and Margaret sat in her own room with the door open, listening in great anxiety, until at last she heard him leaving.

"What is the matter? Is she very ill?" were the breathless questions.

"Oh no! she is not very ill," said the doctor, cheerfully; "she must lie down and take care of herself, that is all, and I think everything will come right."

Immensely relieved, Margaret asked permission to see her friend, and found Ethel quite cheerful, but very white and rather weak.

"I suppose you know what is the matter," she said. "Don't look so frightened, dear little girl. I must try and save the life of Lawrence's baby,

by keeping quiet for a little while. You must cheer Lawrence up, won't you? See that he eats properly till I can come down again. It is lucky Sophy is here. She will amuse him. But I hope she won't annoy Cousin Maude too much."

Lady Maude took the whole affair very calmly. Her maid was an excellent nurse, she said, and Ethel would be well looked after.

"What you must do, Margaret," she said, "is to prevent that terrible sister-in-law getting up into Ethel's room. It is really a crime to have such relations. The creature has no more manners than she has taste in dress," and judging by what she had hitherto seen, Margaret thought this verdict fair, though she afterwards modified it somewhat.

For one thing, Sophy was really useful in occupying her brother's attention during the week or two that Ethel was obliged to remain upstairs. Poor Mr Mainwaring was completely lost without his wife. His preference would have been to bring all his books and writing materials into her room, and to consult her as usual about every page. He would have forgotten both his meals and his daily exercise if Ethel and Sophy between them had not forced him to recollect them.

Miss Mainwaring was an intelligent companion, and possessed plenty of physical strength, so that

she and her brother were able to explore Valetta with some thoroughness, wearying the authorities for keys and passes into disused forts or moats now turned into private gardens, and jealously protected from the public. Occasionally Margaret accompanied the pair, enjoying the historical disquisitions of the brother, and the pungent remarks of the sister, admiring the quiet corners with the great grey shadows and vivid patches of green where the grass was already sprouting, but yet shrinking a little from the companionship of such a very pronounced 'women's rights' champion, in a place where the lighter sides of life, its amusements and adornments, were more obvious than the dark necessities of struggle and stress. Actual theological discussion Sophy spared them, though the atmosphere of scepticism was present everywhere. Ethel herself had implored her sister-in-law not to disturb Margaret's beliefs.

"I am in constant terror myself of unsettling her," she had said, "and I should never forgive myself if her fondness for me brought such trouble upon her."

"I have no wish to proselytise," replied Sophy, "but so far as I can judge, the danger is rather the other way—that you are worrying yourself with all the old arguments over again."

"Perhaps I am. At any rate the simple, happy way that child believes, and acts on her belief, has

impressed me very much, and I envy her the power."

"It is your state of health, no doubt," responded Sophy, cheerfully. "It will pass off when your troubles are over and you are in your normal condition again."

"I do wish," sighed Ethel, "that the boundaries between one's mind and one's body were more clearly marked."

"Do you believe there are any?" asked Sophy.

"I am sure my responsibility begins *somewhere*," she answered, "for I feel it; but I should like to be certain *where*. For instance, if I have something wrong with my liver, I feel depressed. Now depression is a mental feeling. How far can I resist it?"

"My dear child, don't you see you are talking nonsense? Your liver affects your brain. Your depression is as physical as the pain in your side."

"I know, of course," said Ethel, a little impatiently, "that my mental feelings are caused by, or contemporaneous with, brain disturbance, but the fact remains, that I cannot prevent myself from feeling the pain in my side, whereas I can prevent myself from feeling cross, and if I don't, I have a distinct sensation of guilt."

"That proves nothing," replied Sophy, "it is the result of inherited tendencies and training

that have taught you to believe in right and wrong and free will and all the rest of it. It is entirely temperament — *i.e.*, physical constitution."

"I suppose you think all religion is 'physical constitution'?"

"Certainly I do. The pictures of mediæval saints show you the supreme type of the religionist clearly enough. It is not a type which ever flourished much in England, but there have been a good many specimens even among us, within the last fifty years, neurotic, anæmic creatures, with contracted foreheads and receding chins."

"Well," said Ethel, "I don't believe it. I know there is some truth in it, but I am quite certain it is not the whole truth. It explains nothing, only makes the darkness more hopeless. Heredity and environment and physical constitution may answer for a good deal, but not for everything. There is mystery behind. To believe that we humans have invented the idea of free-will is more incredible than any other theory. You will never make me accept it. And yet," she added, after a pause, and almost with a sob, "if anyone ever was a victim to instinct, I am one. Here I am laid by, hating myself for not being able to help Lawrence with his work, and yet, would you believe it, Sophy, I do so yearn to have my baby in my arms that I feel as if I could

hardly bear to wait and live through the next few months."

Sophy did not speak for a minute; then she said, "The question of marriage is a very perplexing one, no doubt. You will be surprised that it affects me at all, but I have lately been obliged to consider it very carefully."

"Oh, Sophy!" cried Ethel, in her eagerness almost sitting up in bed, "did someone want to marry you?"

"He does still," replied Miss Mainwaring very gravely.

"Oh, Sophy!" exclaimed Ethel again, "who is he?"

"His name is Henry Willcox. He is not what you would call a gentleman, and he is younger than I am, about the same age as Lawrence, but he is a power already and likely to increase in influence. He will be one of the great Socialist leaders, and he is anxious I should help him."

"Can't you do that without marrying him?"

"I suppose I could," said Sophy, with a half-smile, "but hardly in such an intimate way, in the present state of Society. However, I have not yet decided what answer to give him. I wish to consult Lawrence more particularly. It is rather embarrassing that Mr Willcox should have followed me here."

"Followed you here!" exclaimed Ethel.

"He has, indeed," said Sophy, in a tone of deprecating complacency. "He is staying at a hotel in Valetta, and I have met him several times in the streets. He has already made friends with some of the Maltese opposition, and is collecting valuable materials for a fresh campaign against the Government on his return."

CHAPTER IX

COURTING

A FIERCE gregale, with torrents of rain, raged for forty-eight hours before the day fixed for the children's party on board the Flag-ship. It was the first really bad weather since the arrival of Lady Maude and her guests, and they were therefore thrown more than before on their own resources.

Dr Masters and Christopher had recourse to the billiard-table, and Margaret, who could also play rather well, divided her time chiefly between billiards and Ethel's bedroom. Sophy took the opportunity of having lengthy conversations with her brother on the subject of Mr Willcox—a subject which seemed to afford her as lively satisfaction, and to require as much threshing out, as the first proposal made to a young girl after a London season. Poor Lawrence was much perplexed. He had not made any study of the subject of matrimony. His own marriage had been, so to say, an accident; it was purely an affair of the heart; Ethel Benson had suddenly become indispensable

to him and he had married her, but he was not prepared with any theories or generalisations; and Sophy's appeal to him for advice, and still more her evident enjoyment of the situation, worried him unspeakably.

On the first day of the gregale the wind was so tremendous and the rain so incessant that no visitors appeared at all, and even the men at Bello Sguardo stayed indoors, but on the second day the weather calmed a little towards the evening, and Christopher announced that he should go in to Valetta to dine at the Club and probably go to the opera afterwards.

Margaret went out into the garden for a moment, but was almost carried off her feet, and obliged to content herself with admiring the magnificent sea from the windows.

Ethel had been kept awake all night by the storm, and Margaret read her to sleep during the afternoon: then going downstairs she went into the hall, and after her vain attempt to walk down the garden, stood behind the curtains of the large window staring out into the twilight and dreaming of her mother and sisters, when voices behind her made her realise she was not alone.

Miss Mainwaring was slowly pacing the long stone passage, and by her side was a man. She was speaking in a lower key than usual, but Margaret distinctly heard her say, "I do not see why

you expect me to answer you immediately. I must have time to make up my mind."

Then came the man's reply, the voice not unpleasant, but not refined in the articulation. "I do not wish to hurry you, but we are neither of us babies, and surely the matter is simple enough. I ask you to join with me in the great Crusade. We are going to win before fifty years are out. With good luck perhaps we may live to see it. Would you not like to lend a hand? You are accustomed to teaching, there is plenty of teaching to do. You have money—we want some. I can speak and write, and you will be, I firmly believe, of the greatest assistance."

"The cause has my entire sympathy, as you know," was Sophy's reply, "but there may be other ways of helping it, and my family——" here the voice died away in the distance, and Margaret heard no more

The girl shuddered to herself. "Oh dear!" she thought, "if that is the way Socialists make love to each other, I am glad I am not a Socialist. Perhaps it is because she is old and ugly, poor thing. How can she ever dream of marrying a man who has an accent like that? Yet perhaps she would rather have him than nobody. I wonder why almost all women are so anxious to get married. I don't particularly want to marry, certainly not to a man who doesn't even talk like a gentleman. I

wonder what that ring at the door is. Ford," as the butler came up, "will you ask her Ladyship if we may have tea in the billiard-room, for Miss Mainwaring is, I think, busy in the drawing-room."

She moved off into the billiard-room as she spoke, and a minute later Arthur Gordon walked in.

"I just came up to see if it was all right about to-morrow," he said. "You haven't forgotten our children's party?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," replied Margaret, "but how about the weather? No one will come if it is a day like this."

"Oh, it is getting better every minute," he answered, cheerfully, "the wind is much lighter this evening and there is quite a bright moon. You'll see it will be a lovely day to-morrow. How are you coming?"

"With Mrs Thompson. I am going to lunch there first."

"That is a capital plan. I am afraid I shan't be able to come ashore myself, but Barclay will be on the lookout for you at the Custom House. You know him, don't you? He is a great chum of mine. He will bring you off to the ship."

"Thank you," said Margaret. "I don't think we shall lose ourselves. Mrs Thompson and I know our way about pretty well now."

"Don't laugh at me, Miss Somers. I was

awfully afraid you might be going to throw us over at the last minute."

"Oh, now I understand!" she said, merrily. "You are sending Mr Barclay to lead me captive. But really I am most anxious to come. I love children's parties, and I want to see the *Royal Alice*. Are you going to have a great many people on board?"

"I believe about three hundred altogether. Barclay is going to give a Punch and Judy show, and we shall have games and some dances for the older ones."

"What fun it will be!" cried Margaret. "Oh! do you know we have our excitements too. There is a love affair—at least if one can call it that—going on in the next room?"

"Who? Mr Beaufoy?" asked Gordon, rather eagerly. He was not so jealous of Christopher as he was of the Count, but still there would be some satisfaction in knowing that there was no chance of rivalry in that quarter. A young man who is supposed to have £30,000 a year is no mean antagonist.

"No, not Mr Beaufoy, though I think he must be smitten with somebody who always goes to the Opera, for he is perpetually going there now, and I never thought he cared about music before; but this is much more amusing. Have you seen Mr Mainwaring's sister?"

"I met her in the street the other day and Lady Maude introduced me, and I saw her again walking in Valetta with a most awful bounder. I never saw such a chap. He was got up in an extraordinary sort of tourist's costume and he talked broad Cockney."

"That's the man!" cried Margaret. "I have only just seen him, but I know it is. Well, he wants to marry Miss Sophy. I suppose he is telling her so now, in there," and she cast a laughing glance over her shoulder in the direction of the drawing-room.

"Oh! . . ." said Arthur. "Very suitable, I should think. They could jaw away together about socialism, and all that rot, as much as they pleased."

"How very coolly you take it!" exclaimed Margaret. "I was trying to feel thrilled, and to wonder whether she would say yes or no."

"She is certain to say yes," said Arthur, calmly.

"Why?" asked Margaret.

"Oh! because—because women generally do."

Margaret burst into a fit of laughter, and Arthur was about to offer some lame explanation when Ford and the tea-tray arrived. "If you please, Miss," said the butler, with his usual solemnity, but with a twinkle in his eye, "her Ladyship says she 'as a 'eadache and won't come down to tea, and will you please to give Miss Mainwaring

and the other gentleman some tea if they asks for it."

"Then we needn't disturb them! That's all right," said Miss Somers, with a sigh of relief.

"Seems to me as *she* don't want to be disturbed," said the old man to himself, as he closed the door on the two young people.

Arthur Gordon had perhaps never had Margaret so quietly to himself before, and she had never been so frankly friendly, claiming his sympathy and interest in all the little details of her life. She even told him about her sister Francie's last letter, about all the fun they were having at home during Harold's Christmas vacation, and how young Mr Milner seemed to be almost living there and had turned out to be a very nice fellow, in spite of a little wildness at College; "and I really begin to think," said Margaret, sagely, "that mamma has her eye on him for Francie; he is just coming of age, four years older than she is, and very well off, so it would be a very good arrangement."

Arthur had intended to tell her in return about his home, but this last innocent remark froze him up. Alas! he was not very well off, it would not be 'a very good arrangement' from Mrs Somers' point of view if he were to marry Margaret. What was the good of stopping here and trying to delude himself into the idea that she

might one day care for him? So he was silent, and Margaret saw at once that something had hurt him.

"What is the matter?" she asked, quickly; "have you had bad news from home?"

"Oh no!" he answered, recovering himself. "And you know my home is not to me what yours is to you. My mother is dead, for one thing, my father is very busy, and all my brothers and sisters have their own affairs to look after; I have been at sea for the last ten years, and now I feel quite out of it whenever I go home. One's friends grow up and change or go away, and one's hole gets filled up in no time."

"Yes," said Margaret, thoughtfully, "it must be hard."

"My real home is my ship for the time being. I am much sorrier when the ship pays off than I am when I leave home. I think most fellows in the Service are like that till they marry."

Till they marry! what brought them always round to this same question? Fortunately, the drawing-room door opened at this moment, and they heard Miss Mainwaring say, "Won't you have some tea before you go?" and Mr Willcox replied, "Thank you; where is it served?"

Gordon jumped up at Margaret's sign, threw open the billiard-room door, and invited Miss Mainwaring in. Mr Willcox followed, and she

introduced him to Margaret, who was obliged to take his outstretched hand. He seated himself by her, and immediately began to discourse.

"You have not been much among the people here, I suppose?" he said.

"The Maltese, do you mean? No, I am afraid not. I cannot talk their language, and they talk very little English."

"I am glad to find there is a great deal of nationalist feeling among them. I have been around Valetta with some Maltese gentlemen who express themselves very strongly against the English rule."

"You are glad of that?" asked Margaret.

"Certainly. Discontent is the first upward movement. Why should they not be discontented? What have we done for them? We have destroyed their liberty, kept them in degradation and ignorance, and in a state of religious slavery. They are over-crowded and under-paid. Both sanitation and education are in a disgraceful state. The English come here either to amuse themselves, like you, or to rule with a rod of iron, like the officials. In neither case do they take the least interest in the native inhabitants, or make the least effort to improve their condition."

"Oh, really! I don't think that is true," said Margaret. "I am sure the Governor works very hard. He is always giving prizes away in schools

and subscribing to charities, besides his regular official work."

"Priest-ridden schools and charities are not what is wanted," replied Mr Willcox, hotly. "They keep the people down, make them contented with their miserable lot, teach submission as a duty."

"But surely they are much happier when they are contented," urged Margaret. "Why, there is a boy here of about eighteen who is what they call a 'fatica man.' He goes with the cook to the market, and does the dirty work of the house, and all the odds and ends of messages and things that are nobody's business. He sleeps on a wicker bench in the pantry, has no boots or stockings, and I suppose no change of clothes of any kind, and he certainly can't read or write. I believe his wages are nine shillings a week and his food. He is always up to open the door if we come back late from a ball, and he is the first to get up in the morning. But he is the merriest person in the house, always smiling, always singing over his work. It seems to me it would be cruel to make him discontented."

"Well, Miss Somers, I am much obliged to you; I had not expected such a complete justification for my words. Your argument was used in every campaign against existing scandals. It was used on behalf of Slavery, and against the

Education Act. It is the stock argument everywhere of Conservatives and Obstructionists. The Progressives have demolished it again and again, and it is always ready to start up afresh on behalf of some old abuse which we are attacking."

"What will become of discipline in your new world?" interposed Gordon.

"It will be no longer required," broke in Miss Mainwaring, rapturously. "When all are equal, none will command, and none obey."

"And the children?" asked Margaret.

"They will learn by the force of example. No coercion will be needed."

"We are far enough off from our goal at present," said Willcox, sadly. "We have hard work before us, and need to rouse the sympathies of all well-meaning persons who misunderstand us at present. Surely a walk through the back streets of Westminster, within a stone's throw of the Houses of Parliament and the palaces of Belgravia, is enough to show that our present system is rotten to the core."

"Even so, we may differ as to the remedy," said Gordon.

"Oh, we may differ," replied Willcox; "but the majority of the well-to-do classes at present only desire to keep things as they are. They have the best of it and they wish to keep it. But the people are waking up to a knowledge of their

power, and they will soon show you what they can do. I am one of them ; I am a working man, the son of a working man—and I *know*.”

Margaret forgot his coarse features, Cockney accent and vulgar necktie as she listened. It was obvious that Mr Willcox was an enthusiast, and enthusiasm of any kind greatly ennobles its possessor.

“Do you think there will be a revolution?” she asked. She thought that Henry Willcox might be well imagined in command of a street barricade.

“We desire a peaceful revolution,” he replied, “but whether it is so or not depends on the classes. A revolution of some kind there must certainly be ; in fact, it has begun. At present it moves slowly, but it will gather impetus as it rolls on. Russia should be a warning to England. We may be driven to use the Nihilist’s weapons if we are kept too long waiting for our rights.”

“I should have thought the teaching of Russian attempts at revolution pointed rather the other way,” said Gordon, drily. “The result seems to have been sterner repression and reforms postponed indefinitely.”

“Ah! you do not know what is working underground,” replied Willcox, triumphantly. “After all, we are only in the first decade of the new century. Feudalism is dead, but it has died hard, and that was a great work for the nineteenth

century to accomplish. We shall have perhaps even a tougher fight with Capital, but I tell you that a hundred years hence, houses like this"—he gave a comprehensive sweep with his hand—"will have ceased to exist, or will remain only as possessions of the State, for the use of all. There will be no idle class, and consequently no degraded serfs to minister to their luxuries. All will do their share of work—manual, artistic or intellectual, according to their tastes and capacities—and all will enjoy their share of leisure, with the joys of life from which the masses are at present almost entirely debarred."

"Oh! may I live to see it!" sighed Miss Sophy Mainwaring.

"You can live to help it on, at any rate," replied Mr Willcox, rather roughly. "While I have been talking, my tea has got cold. Miss Somers, will you give me some hot?"

Margaret refilled the cup he held out to her, and he drank it at a gulp, holding the spoon inside the cup, and then asked for more. Miss Mainwaring told them afterwards that on principle he neither drank anything alcoholic nor dined late. A bread and cheese supper was all he allowed himself, so perhaps it was not wonderful that he enjoyed Lady Maude's bread and butter, and the cakes from the 'sick man' in Strada Reale—Bizacca, the famous 'midshipmen's friend.'

CHAPTER X

THE *ROYAL ALICE*

ARTHUR GORDON was right; the fury of the gregale had spent itself; the wind dropped, the sun shone, and the day was most propitious for the party on board the *Royal Alice*.

Margaret went into Valetta to lunch with Mrs Thompson. Little Harry was in a wild state of excitement and hardly ate anything. He was looking rather white, but his mother said it was only the result of the three days' storm. His little sister was invited also, and the four started walking together down to the Custom House, where, true to his promise, stood Mr Barclay in waiting, with a steam-pinnace alongside the wharf. Other guests came, and just when the boat was nearly full and was about to push off, a carrozze rattled down, and out of it jumped Count Bartoloff, escorting, as usual, Lady Browne and her little daughter Blanche, a pretty child of eight or ten. There was barely room, but they all squeezed in and the boat started.

It was rather stuffy in the covered part of the pinnace, and Lady Browne used her smelling-bottle, offering it freely to her neighbours. Mrs Thompson, with an air of embarrassment, refused it, and turned pointedly away to the lady on her other side, but Harry, attracted by the gold stopper, began to play with it, and Margaret was drawn into conversation with Lady Browne, having previously only known her by sight. Count Bartoloff was standing outside, but when they reached the ship he saw Margaret, and greeted her with a profound bow. During the Punch and Judy show he sat beside her and took Harry on his knee.

"The English are a curious people," he remarked, when Punch was occupied in throwing his baby about. "You take your children to see this very immoral performance, the teaching of which hardly agrees with what they learn in church!"

"It is true," said Margaret, "I can't think why we do, but the children seem to enjoy it, and I only hope they don't realise the moral."

"You deceive yourself, Miss Somers," said the Count, gravely, as Punch hanged the policeman amid the shrieks of delight of the youthful spectators. "They realise by instinct that what they are watching is the revolt of nature against authority, and they are always on the side of nature."

"I heard a good deal about that yesterday,"

said Margaret, "from a Mr Willcox who is in Malta just now and is a great Socialist."

"Ah!" said the Count. "I met him at the Club. But he talks too much. Your English Socialism is milk and water — you are afraid of strong measures, and you like your Policeman; you do not, after all, want to see him hanged. What will be done must be done in secret; nature works quietly underground, and then comes the earthquake. Perhaps the Anglo-Saxon has had his day. Before this century's close the Slav may have his. Who knows? But I must not talk like this here. Do you see those guns? The Admiral might order me to be blown from them as the Turks were in old days from those at Fort St Elmo. Or the captain might put me in irons. Or that young officer—he looks very dangerous—might send me up the mast, which would be almost more unpleasant, only, fortunately, ships now do not possess masts."

Margaret laughed, and greeted Arthur Gordon, who certainly looked less amiable than he had done the previous day at Bello Sguardo.

"I came to see if you would like to go round the ship," he said, with a side glance at the Count, "but perhaps you would rather do so later on."

"No, I should like to come now, very much. I am off duty for the present, for Harry went with Mr Barclay to see the inside of that wonder-

ful Punch and Judy box, and I suppose he is happy, as he has not come back."

"Yes," said Gordon. "He is watching some conjuring tricks, and as I couldn't see you there, I came to find out what you were doing."

"I had not moved," said Margaret; then, when they had started on their tour of inspection, she added suddenly, "Do you dislike all foreigners as much as you do Count Bartoloff?"

"What makes you think I dislike him?"

She laughed. "It doesn't require a magician to find that out. The expression of your face when you come near him is quite sufficient."

"I don't think he is a good sort," said Gordon, stiffly; "if I were Lady Maude I should not let him come into my house. I don't know whose guest he is here; he is certainly not mine."

"I fear you are a prejudiced person," said Margaret, lightly. "How prettily all those flags are arranged, and the arms! Did you have anything to do with the decorations?"

"Oh! we all did our share," he answered; "flowers are cheap and our bumboat man brought us plenty, so that helped a great deal. The way the electric lights are arranged is my idea—I am going to show some little experiments by-and-bye, if anyone cares to look at them."

"Oh, do let me come and see them! Only take care you don't blow yourself up."

"They are quite simple and not at all dangerous," he replied, and now being restored to his normal good-humour, he did the honours of the ship to her so effectually, that for half-an-hour no one saw or heard of them again. The party was most successful—the children's part of the programme had been thoroughly carried out, and the little ones were being collected by weary mothers anxious to go on shore with the first boat. Mrs Thompson wished Harry and his sister to leave, but Arthur Gordon said Margaret must not think of going yet. There was to be an hour's dancing before the party broke up, and there were plenty of available chaperons. So Mrs Thompson left her with another respectable matron, and the dancing began.

Arthur Gordon had still sufficient sense left to know that he could not stay the whole evening with Margaret without exciting remark, so he left her to Mr Barclay, who begged for the first waltz, and they spun round the smooth deck together.

"You know Gordon very well, don't you?" he said, as they paused.

"I met him at home, in the country," replied Margaret, rather hypocritically.

"He is a very good fellow, and awfully clever," said Barclay. "He got his 'five ones,' and he is sure to get on well in the Service. But promotion is so slow now. There are rumours of war again, I hear. That would make it go faster."

"Oh, don't!" cried Margaret; "don't let's talk of anything so horrible. What a lovely night it is! I can hardly believe it was blowing so only yesterday."

"Like a sailor's life," he said, smiling, "one never knows what is coming next."

Meanwhile, on the further side of the next gun, and almost hidden by a huge Royal Standard, stood two figures in very earnest conversation. The woman had her head a little averted from her companion and was looking down. She spoke rapidly and very low.

"I want some proof. How can I tell? You ask everything from me—but you are not even constant to me in society. You have been spending half the evening with that pretty Miss Somers. If you cared for me as you say you do, how could you do that?"

"*Ma bien aimée*, do you really doubt me?" was the man's answer. "I do not wish to give the world too much to talk about us. They talk enough, as it is. Surely it is better to be cautious in public."

"You don't know what you ask," she said, piteously. "For a woman there is no returning. I cannot face it."

"Listen, sweet," he said. "If you bid me depart, I obey you——"

"I cannot do that," she said, smiling up at him through her tears.

His arm stole round her waist, and their lips met. No one could hear what they had said, but there was a tiny space between two flags, and Miss Jarvis' eye was at the opening.

Of course Miss Jarvis was at the party. To be sure she had no hope of meeting Christopher, for she had passed him that morning in Strada Reale, and he had told her he was otherwise engaged ; but there were other meshes of her net besides that in which she destined to entangle Mr Beaufoy. Captain Jordan, Royal Marines, was one of her victims, and it was he who procured her the invitation to the *Royal Alice*.

Isabel's eyes and ears were always open, and she found plenty of material for gossip during the afternoon. But her discovery through the chink in the flags was the most exciting of all ; she did not exactly know what it portended. Should she promptly use her knowledge, or should she wait and see what happened ? On the whole, she thought the latter was the better plan. Lady Browne was talked about, but no one knew anything definite. Now a kiss was something very definite, and the knowledge of it might prove useful some day, but for the moment she would only indulge in vague hints and not really say all she knew. She had time to think the matter over quietly, for Captain Jordan had left her to attend to other guests, and no one had as yet asked her to dance. It was here that

Arthur Gordon found her, and though he was longing to get back to Margaret, he sacrificed his inclinations in order to fulfil his duties as a host. If Miss Jarvis was not dancing, it was his business to dance with her, and he did so. They passed Count Bartoloff, who was escorting Lady Browne back to the steam-launch, and this set Isabel's tongue wagging at once.

"How popular the Russian Count is!" she said, significantly. "He might take Cæsar's motto for his own. The earlier part of the evening he quite deserted Lady Browne for Miss Somers, but she doesn't seem to mind. I suppose he wants to play them off against each other; or perhaps he has got tired of Lady Browne and has really fallen in love with Miss Somers. She is a pretty girl, I should not be surprised."

"I don't see any occasion for coupling their names together," said Gordon, feeling he might be betraying himself, and yet that he must defend Margaret at all costs.

"Oh! I assure you I am not the first to notice it. The fact is, Lady Maude ought to take greater care of her. No one knows who her chaperon really is, and a young girl ought to have a chaperon here, especially when there are Russian Counts hanging about."

"I think Miss Somers is very well able to take care of herself," said Arthur, feeling at the same

time that his heart had sunk down to the region of his boots. "Will you have an ice?"

"Thanks," said Isabel, seeing she had said enough for the moment.

She had indeed made poor Arthur thoroughly miserable. He knew Margaret would resent any attempt of his to put her on her guard against Count Bartoloff, attributing it probably—and perhaps with some reason—to jealousy on his part. He believed the man to be thoroughly worthless, and the mere possibility that she might fall in love with him was bad enough. As to talking to Lady Maude, that was out of the question. His only hope was in Mrs Mainwaring. As soon as she was downstairs again he would come and see her, and ask her to do what she could.

Ethel was indeed allowed out of her room on the very day of the children's party, and on the first opportunity Arthur Gordon called and asked to see her. Fortune favoured him, for she was quite alone, and he began at once on the subject nearest his heart. Of course such a proceeding was equivalent to confessing that he loved Margaret, and, in fact, though he never said so in actual words, this was understood by them both throughout the conversation. Ethel tried to reassure him.

"I have heard of Miss Jarvis," she said, "and I don't think anyone pays much attention to what she says. She probably wished to annoy you.

But I will talk about it to Lady Maude, and I will put Margaret on her guard. She is independent, and would not like to be coerced, but I think she will attend to what I say. Meanwhile, though you can't speak to her yourself, you are meeting her constantly and you can watch, and if anything more happens, you can let me know."

"Thank you very much," said Arthur, fervently. "It is all this cursed money; I have never wanted to be rich till now. But as it is, I have no right to think about anything." With which incoherent speech he wrung her hand and left the room.

CHAPTER XI

RIGOLETTO

THE weather had now become much colder, fires had to be lighted in all the rooms, and ladies found furs a comfort in driving. At the same time there was a sudden epidemic of fever—chiefly in the Fleet, but also among the soldiers in barracks and the inhabitants of Valetta. In most cases it was not of a serious nature; care and quinine soon effected a remedy, but some persons were very dangerously ill, among them being Lieutenant Barclay, who was sent up to the Hospital at Bighi, and little Harry Thompson, who hung for several days between life and death. Margaret was very often at the Thompsons' house, and one day, when the child was lying in a comatose condition and did not recognise her, she remained for hours in case he should rouse himself and ask for her. It was a Wednesday, and she had to go back at last to Bello Sguardo to dress and accompany Lady Maude to the Opera. She was tired and low-spirited, and

wished she could stop at home, but Lady Maude insisted that it would be good for her to go, so she gave way. She had, however, mentioned to Colonel Thompson that she could be found at the Opera in case Harry wanted her, and very soon the lovely music of *Rigoletto* entranced her and temporarily chased away her cares.

The little Signorina made an admirable Gilda. She not only sang exquisitely, but her acting quite carried the audience away, and for once the English in the boxes forgot to talk.

Christopher Beaufoy remained during the first act in his mother's box; then he disappeared behind the scenes and did not return. Others came and went. Count Bartoloff, who had been in Sir William Browne's box, came and sat down by Margaret during one interval, while Colonel Morrison and Mr Lang were entertaining Lady Maude. Margaret returned the Count's greeting more languidly than usual, and he immediately remarked on the difference, asking her what was amiss, and saying she looked pale. "I am anxious about Colonel Thompson's little boy," she replied; "I am very fond of him, and he has a bad attack of fever. They are afraid he may not live——" Her voice trembled a little.

Count Bartoloff was sympathetic. "You love children—so do I. I am very fond of my little friend, Miss Browne."

Margaret said nothing—the Count did not attract her to-night. She gazed dreamily down into the stalls, and saw Arthur Gordon standing up and looking at her. She smiled and made a gesture to invite him to come—a signal which was at once understood and obeyed. In a minute he was at her side, and she experienced an immediate sense of relief and protection. “How is Harry?” was Gordon’s first question.

“Very ill, I am afraid,” she replied. “He was quite unconscious this afternoon. I wanted to get off coming here, but Lady Maude wished me to come. It is lovely music, but I hardly feel in tune for it to-night. I can think of nothing but poor Colonel and Mrs Thompson. They simply worship the boy, and he is such a duck. He asks me the most wonderful questions sometimes. One day he wanted to know why the devil was made; and then why some people were made black and some white, and how we can get to Heaven without wings.”

“Poor little chap,” said Arthur, “I hope he will get well.”

At that moment the door of the box opened again, and Colonel Thompson himself appeared. The Count and the two soldiers made way for him, and, with apologies to Lady Maude, the Colonel begged to know if Miss Somers would come back with him to his house. “Harry has

woke up from a short sleep," he said, "and is asking for you. He is certainly conscious now, and we hope the fever is not quite so high, but we are expecting the doctor any minute. My wife said you had promised to come back if he asked for you, so I have ventured to see if you would return with me."

With Lady Maude's permission Margaret immediately put on her cloak and left the theatre on foot, as the distance was very short, escorted by Colonel Thompson and Arthur Gordon. On the way she asked how Mr Barclay was.

"Much the same," Arthur replied. "I got up to the Hospital this afternoon, and they just let me go in for a minute to see him; but they would not let me stop. He looks like a ghost, but the fever is no higher, so there is hope."

Margaret sighed. Their mutual anxiety seemed to bring her and Arthur Gordon closer together. The only other person who at all approached him in interest for her was Count Bartoloff, and she was beginning to feel a little alarmed about the latter. In her quiet English country life she had never come across any 'doubtful' personages. There, everyone knew everything about everybody, and she was accustomed to meet even strangers frankly and without suspicion. The Count's appearance and manners, being foreign to her previous experience, had somewhat fascinated her. His person-

ality had interested her, and his attentions to herself had flattered her ; but Ethel's warnings had not been altogether disregarded, nor could she shut her ears to the rising tide of gossip which coupled his name with Lady Browne's. Moreover, that very evening, when driving out to Bello Sguardo to dress, she had seen the Count standing under an arch near the railway-station, and by his side was a woman in a faldetta ; and that woman's face bore a remarkable likeness to Lady Browne. It was only a glimpse, to be sure, but she did not think she was mistaken ; and Christopher Beaufoy's words recurred to her memory—"Maltese ladies wear the faldetta to go to church, but if any other woman puts one on, you know she is up to some mischief."

In consequence, she had received Count Bartoloff coldly at the Opera, and had thereby piqued his curiosity and excited his ambition.

Little Harry was awake, and clamouring for 'Summie,' so she went at once to his room, and begged to be allowed to remain on guard while the worn-out mother and nurse had some rest. The doctor had just left, saying he had more hope, as the fever, though still high, seemed inclined to diminish, and the pulse was stronger. The child was to be constantly fed with soup and milk, and kept as quiet as possible.

Margaret had had experience in nursing her own

brothers and sisters, and had considerable influence over the excitable little mortal now in bed. She told him stories, sang to him, and finally soothed and quieted him, so that towards morning he settled into a peaceful sleep, and she left him slumbering sweetly when she went home to breakfast. She found, however, that the household at Bello Sguardo was in a considerable ferment. It appeared that Christopher had never come back to his mother's box, and that Lady Maude was obliged to leave the theatre without his escort. She was excessively angry, and ordered that all the doors of the house should be securely locked, and that no one should wait up for him. She had apparently sat up half the night listening for his bell, but he had not returned at all, and now she did not know whether to be anxious or furious.

Her first movement was to summon Dr Masters to her bedroom. "Pray give me something to calm me," she said; "I have not had my nerves agitated so much for a long time, and I am sure it is very bad for me—I might have a fit or something. Oh! don't go away yet—I want to talk to you. Have you any idea where my son is? Have you seen him?"

Dr Masters shook his head. He had been dining out the previous evening, and had returned before the Opera was over, so he had known nothing of Christopher's absence.

"Well, don't stand doing nothing," said Lady

Maude, irritably, "Pray go and get me a draught, and then you can go into Valetta and see if you can find him—you are the only sane man in the house. Lawrence Mainwaring is worse than no use."

The doctor obediently departed, but outside the door he was stopped by Miss Sophy, who signed to him to wait. "Is she much upset, poor old thing?" she said. "Of course you know where this precious son of hers was?"

"Well, I can guess, perhaps, but I know nothing."

"I don't believe that. At any rate, Lady Maude is the only person who has no suspicions. Why, the creature has been carrying on in the most bare-faced way with that Italian girl. I think you ought to tell his mother."

"Not I," said the doctor; "it is none of my business. I am going to give the poor lady a little bromide"—and he passed on.

"Good gracious!" said Miss Sophy, as a step came up the stairs, "I do believe it is young Beaufoy. I wonder if he heard?"

Mr Beaufoy strolled very calmly in, about nine o'clock, with his overcoat over his evening clothes, and was about to change into morning dress, when his mother sent a peremptory message, ordering him to her room. He was always, as I have said, respectful to her, and he came immediately.

"Well, Christopher," said Lady Maude, in a most irate tone, "I should like to know what you mean by your behaviour last night. Do you know I was absolutely alone when the Opera ended, and should have had no one to call the carriage or see me out, if Colonel Morrison had not fortunately been at the entrance of the theatre and seen me?"

"I am very sorry," said Christopher, "but Miss Somers was there, was she not?"

"No, she was not. I let her go to see Colonel Thompson's little sick boy, and, of course, I thought you would come back. I never dreamt of your deserting me."

Christopher saw that she was really distressed and almost crying. "I am extremely sorry," he repeated; "I had no intention of leaving you, but the fact was, that just as the Opera ended and I was coming back to you, Signorina Bianchi had a bad fainting attack, and I had to see her home."

"I don't see the least why you had to see her home. I did not even know you had the honour of her acquaintance."

"Oh, yes—I have met her," he replied, carelessly, "and it so happened that I was the only Englishman present, and therefore the only one who kept his head. All the rest were frightened out of their wits, and did nothing but chatter. The girl's old aunt, who takes care of her, thought she was dead and made a terrible to-do, and she seemed such a

helpless old thing that I took pity on her, and brought them both home in a cab."

"Well, that didn't take all night."

"It took some time, what with carrying her upstairs, and getting the doctor and the medicines. The poor girl is really rather ill: it is a question if she will be able to sing again this season. I did not like to go till I had seen the old lady pretty peaceful again, and by that time it was so late, I thought I had better turn in at the Club."

"And you never thought of my anxiety, of course?"

"I certainly never thought you would be *anxious*. I don't wonder you were annoyed, but I really thought it a pity to disturb the household in the early hours of the morning. I would have come home sooner rather than have distressed you so."

"Well," said Lady Maude, mollified in spite of herself, "I suppose there is nothing more to be said, except that I hope you are not making a fool of yourself about this girl."

"Is it my habit?" said Christopher, relapsing into his usual laconic indifference.

"Not that I am aware of—but even unimpressible men are caught sometimes. Why! your own father—but I need not tell you that story."

"I wish you would," ejaculated her son.

"No, I shall not," retorted Lady Maude, sharply. "I merely meant to say that because you have not been burnt yet, you must not imagine yourself fire-proof. I am not going to have an operatic daughter-in-law."

"I understand," said Christopher. "Well, mother, I suppose you will be getting up soon, and I will go and get out of these clothes, so good-bye for the present."

CHAPTER XII

WHICH MAY BE SKIPPED

HARRY THOMPSON continued to improve, but his convalescence was tedious, and his irritability was extreme. His overwrought mother was often unable to cope with him, his nurse alternately scolded and spoiled, and 'Summie' was in greater request than ever. At times Ethel thought Margaret was overdoing herself. She would be with Harry all the morning, return for a hurried lunch, ride or drive all the afternoon, and be dancing or talking all the evening. Her activity seemed at times a little feverish, but she made no confidences, and in the rush of engagements saw less of Ethel than before, stranded as the latter was in her quiet back-water at Bello Sguardo. There were no more evening parties for Mrs Mainwaring. A little gentle exercise in the garden, a chat with a few friends, were all the relaxation Dr Masters allowed her, and if she chafed inwardly at the restraint, she did not show it. Perhaps the motherly instinct, which seemed to her to get

stronger every day, helped her through this trying time.

Sophy's stay was coming to an end, and Mr Willcox refused to leave Malta until she did, determined by perseverance to overcome the lady's reluctance. Indeed, Miss Mainwaring had pretty well decided not to refuse him. She found him a very interesting companion, realising, as even the cleverest women do, how curiously incomplete and narrow her own views and experiences seemed, when tested by an able man's standard; and it was a constant delight to her to wander about Valetta or into the adjacent country with him and her brother, noticing the marks of all the different nationalities which have made Malta their battle-field, with their rival civilisations, religions, and customs.

"Of all their masters, the English have made least impression on the Maltese," Willcox asserted, and she believed him.

It is a common saying, that if we were turned out of the island to-morrow, in a month's time the only sign of our occupation would be the Opera House. I do not enquire how much truth there is in this: Miss Sophy Mainwaring would have endorsed it.

Once there was a great Tombola at Florian, and this excited her lively indignation. Advertisements announcing it had been posted on the rocks

and railings for days previously, but being in Maltese, she had not read them, and the crowd on this particular day took her by surprise. Not that she minded crowds, or that this one was half so noisy or objectionable as a meeting of Socialists at Whitechapel—but then it was an authorised gamble, a government lottery, a direct discouragement of thrift. She watched the man from his little tribune reading out the figures, and the swaying mass around him listening intently, and she saw at last the first prize—£5, I think—given to a very ragged and decrepit-looking person, who, of course, could have no idea how best to dispose of such a sum. All the white pavement, below which are the corn-magazines, was black with people, almost all Maltese, but of different degrees of poverty, from well-dressed men to ragged, shoeless urchins, who had begged enough to buy a ticket. A few dirty brown babies were crawling and scrambling about in the dust and refuse round some clothes-lines covered with garments flapping in the breeze, and among half-a-dozen hen-coops, with anxiously cackling birds inside, that were placed just off the road, out of the way of carriage traffic. A flock of goats were being driven slowly from door to door for the afternoon milking, and a little gazelle strained at her cord from a neighbouring doorway, gazing at the windy, dusty piazza with mild brown eyes. It was as

untidy and un-English a scene as one could witness anywhere, in its glaring setting of white houses, white pavement, white walls and brilliant sky, but the English were responsible for it, thought Miss Mainwaring, sadly, as a couple of carrozzes crammed with blue-jackets, all in a high state of exhilaration and singing loudly, dashed down the steep hill, whirled round the corner, and disappeared through the entrance to the Calcara gate.

She returned home thoughtfully, considering how best she could bring the facts home to the intelligence and conscience of the working men of England, to whose education she intended to consecrate the remainder of her life. She had already made friends with Rosina, the Maltese housemaid at Bello Sguardo, who was a rather pretty girl, if judged from a Maltese standpoint, and had had what we should call a sad history. In her early youth she had been made love to by a soldier whose regiment was quartered in Malta, and after a short courtship they had married and two babies were born. Then the regiment went home, and the faithless husband had given no sign since. She could not write, but had trusted at first to his promise that he would return, or send for her, but as time went on and no news arrived, she became first anxious and then despairing; at last some one told her that her husband was living with an English wife and had other children, and

even if he would, had no money to send to Rosina. So she went to work every season and supported her babies, living mostly in idleness during the summer, and not doing more than she was obliged during the winter, being quite ready to help herself and her family to any odds and ends of food that she could transfer to her pockets, and thinking no harm in so doing. Sophy pitied her sincerely, but Rosina seemed cheerful.

"It is a good thing I did not set my heart on him," she said, with a laugh of baffling simplicity, and, indeed, to this there could be no answer but in the affirmative.

Like all persons who travel with their eyes open, Miss Mainwaring did, to some extent, increase her knowledge of human nature in hitherto unaccustomed forms during her stay at Malta; but her preconceived ideas were perhaps too firmly rooted for her to perceive to the full the complexity of the problems by which she was surrounded. Small as the island is, and comparatively insignificant as is its trade, with a population less than that of a second-rate English town, yet its strategical importance and its romantic history give it a real grandeur of its own, while its position as a sort of entrance-porch to the East, and the fact that we are there confronted with the immemorial difficulties of a native race, not savage, with its own traditions of culture and religion, make it a

school of deep interest, even though on a small scale, for those who are anxious to study some of the problems of government.

Mr Willcox studied them from his own point of view, listened to eloquent harangues from Borgs and Caruanas and Meles, believed everything they told him to the disadvantage of the English and their system, and felt himself supplied with many poisoned arrows wherewith to assail his ministerialist opponent whenever he was able to contest a seat for Parliament.

The natural beauties of the place did not escape him, for his eyes were as keen as his other senses. Indeed, on this point he and Margaret met in cordial sympathy. The curious fascination which the stony little island exercises over few except its natives had fallen upon her. The sunset lights over the Citta Vecchia hills, the vivid patches of green between the walls of the tiny fields, the luxuriance of the wild flowers by the wayside or in the dry moats and on the glacis of the fortifications, the brilliant colouring and contrasts of sky and sea and white walls, the quaint balconies and fountains in the little country towns, the pleasant creeks and fishing villages along the coast, with all the alterations of a changeable climate—heat and cold, gales and calm, storm and sunshine succeeding each other rapidly—these altogether, with the foreign look of the people, their southern

excitability, their frugality and hard work, even the violence of their driving—though this, alas! involved much cruelty to their poor beasts—were sources of unfailing interest to a girl who had never before left England, and who was absorbing poetry and experience in full measure in this stimulating atmosphere.

Arthur Gordon did not enter into her enthusiasm, but he was quite ready to pander to it, if thereby he could ride with her or act as her escort in any expeditions.

They were never alone together, but there are possibilities of a *tête-à-tête* on such occasions, which he did not fail to utilise. Once or twice, not without a sharp pang, he had given up accompanying her in order to visit his friend Barclay at the Naval Hospital. Clean and fresh as it seemed on the Bighi heights, the garden fair with flowers and swept with pure sea breezes, the seeds of fever lurked there as much as in the slums of Valetta, and one after another the patients had to be shipped off to England, unless they were to be transferred to the pretty cemetery that adjoins the Hospital grounds. At present, Mr Barclay was too weak to be moved home. His once bronzed face was hardly darker than his pillow; he could not lift a cup to his mouth, or turn himself in his bed. Carefully tended by doctors and nurses, there was still hope that his good con-

stitution would pull him through, but as day after day went by, Arthur began to fear the worst.

So, with his dearest friend lying between life and death, and utterly uncertain as to what the end of his love affair would be, Gordon lost something of his careless light-heartedness. He began even to lie awake at night, and whenever he was not at work, his thoughts worked in one monotonous round. Would Margaret ever care for him? If she did, ought he to marry her? Had they enough to marry on? Ought he to expose her to the miseries which a sailor's wife has to endure? Or should he leave the Service and seek other employment? But what could he do? He was trained to his work, and loved it; he felt unsuited to any other, even if he could obtain it. After all, probably she would never care for him, and it would be better so.

And then he began to count the hours till he could see her again.

CHAPTER XIII

A SECRET MISSION

PERHAPS it was not a bad thing for Arthur Gordon that at this juncture his thoughts were unexpectedly diverted into quite a different channel.

There had been many rumours of wars and disturbances in the newspapers, and to those behind the scenes the times were anxious; but to the public it seemed only a repetition of what they had already heard scores of times, and they took it for granted that a peaceful solution would be found, as so often before. At Malta, however, the large garrison and fleet are more easily excited, partly, no doubt, because many among them are always thirsting for active employment, and there was some disappointment when it was announced that the rumoured movement of ships and troops to the East was contradicted. What did happen seemed ridiculously small in comparison. It was only that a military and a naval officer went off on a short shooting-trip, no one exactly knew where. Major Martin, R.A., was the soldier, and

to Arthur Gordon's great surprise, he invited him to be his companion. "I should have asked Barclay to come," he said. "The Admiral has promised leave to anyone who goes, and as poor Barclay is too ill to come, I thought you might like the trip. You are a sportsman, aren't you?"

Arthur was sufficiently the typical Englishman to be happy when he had 'something to kill,' but, of course, in this case the sport was to serve merely as an excuse, and the real interest of the expedition lay in some forts and docks about which the Government were anxious to get accurate particulars. It was naturally an honour to be selected for such service, and the spice of risk attending it made it doubly attractive. But there was no time for farewell visits. He had to buy a few things for his kit ; then he had his day on duty on board the *Royal Alice*. The following morning he left with Major Martin, steaming out into mist and rain, and realising, for the first time since the offer had been made to him, that he was leaving Margaret for an indefinite time without having seen her or explained the cause of his sudden departure.

He was annoyed, and a little anxious as to what might happen in his absence, but he would have been astonished, could he have seen how much Miss Somers resented it. The whole matter had been so quickly and quietly arranged that not

more than half-a-dozen people in all Valetta had heard of it, and it was only on the day after the two officers' departure that Margaret knew they had gone.

It so happened that Count Bartoloff was the person who told her of it. They met at the Marsa, where a polo match was going on. Arthur usually rode at these meetings, and Margaret was watching for his appearance, when the Count came up to the carriage in which she was sitting with Lady Maude, and said, lightly, "So our friend Mr Gordon is to be employed on a diplomatic mission!"

"What do you mean?" asked Margaret, thinking the Count was making a rather foolish joke.

"Perhaps a spy would be nearer the truth," he rejoined, with less than his usual politeness, "but it does not sound so pretty."

"What on earth do you mean?" she repeated, impatiently. "I can't imagine what you are talking about."

"Have you really heard nothing? Do you not know that Mr Gordon and Major Martin have started on a mysterious trip, armed with rifles for shooting some imaginary game, and with notebooks to make drawings of some perhaps equally imaginary fortifications?"

Margaret felt herself change colour in spite of herself, but she tried to seem indifferent and to ask only the questions which everyone would be asking,

as to the why and wherefore of the expedition. The Count could not, or, at any rate, did not, conceal his contempt for the whole thing. It was only Englishmen, he said, who would employ such primitive methods of obtaining information. Officers never made good spies—they had too much sense of honour. A little gold judiciously employed was all that was necessary in order to get hold of the state secrets of any nation, and such means were far better than sending two officers, who would be at once recognised as what they were, and would be possibly subjected to insult, if not worse.

At this point Isabel Jarvis joined the little group, and immediately attacked poor Margaret also.

“Of course you know all about it, Miss Somers. All Valetta is quite excited, and most anxious to hear the particulars. No doubt Mr Gordon has told you everything.”

“I beg your pardon,” she replied, stiffening perceptibly. “I know nothing whatever about it, except what Count Bartoloff has just told me.”

“Oh, indeed! I made sure, as you know Mr Gordon so well, that you would have been better informed than any one. I wonder how long they will be away, and if there is really any danger?”

Lady Maude, who had been unusually silent, and saw that Margaret was really suffering, here broke in—“Danger! stuff and nonsense, why should there

be any danger? Trust two young fellows like that to take care of themselves! Well, Margaret, have you had enough of this? It is getting cold, and the play is very bad to-day."

She gave a short nod to Isabel, a rather more gracious bow to the Count, and drove on, and she had tact enough to talk the whole way home on indifferent subjects without asking for many replies from her companion. When they reached Bello Sguardo she went upstairs at once, but Margaret, attracted by the sound of music, turned into the drawing-room. Ethel was at the piano, playing a Chopin prelude. She had considerable execution and a very delicate and sympathetic touch. She smiled at Margaret without turning her head, and went on playing. At the end she stopped, and still looking before her, said, "I have had a splendid practice this afternoon. I had got counting on the brain, so I took out a Brahms Sonata and had a real, good, hard count at that: the time was very difficult, and it made me feel better. It is dreadful when one can't sleep and can do nothing but count the panes of glass and the pattern of the wall papers and everything all round one."

Margaret made no reply, and, rather surprised, Ethel turned to look at her. She was crying.

"My dear child, what is the matter?" cried the elder woman in distress.

Margaret hid her face on Ethel's shoulder, and

after a moment found voice to speak. "It is stupid, but I have been so taken aback, I don't know what to think." She stopped again, but Ethel's gentle hand-pressure encouraged her, and with a sort of gulp she went on, "They say Mr Gordon has gone off on a kind of mission somewhere with Major Martin—and—and it took me so by surprise, and he never came here to say good-bye, and oh, Ethel! it is dreadful, for what shall I do? I thought—I thought he cared—but he can't, or he would have come—and now I am so ashamed of myself, for I can't think how I shall get on without him. How can I be such a baby? Oh! don't tell anyone. Do you think anyone guesses?"

Ethel was very much astonished and perplexed. She asked Margaret how long Arthur Gordon was to be away, and since when it had been decided that he was to go; but the girl knew nothing beyond what she had just repeated. Ethel longed to comfort her by assuring her that she was practically certain that Arthur Gordon's own feelings were what Margaret had supposed; but she doubted if she had the right to say so, for the young fellow had never actually made her his confidante, but had more than once hinted at obstacles to his marriage; so that she had no certainty that he intended to propose to Margaret, although she felt quite sure he loved her, and in the girl's present frame of mind it did not seem desirable to tell her that the

man to whom she had suddenly discovered her own attachment, reciprocated her feelings, but did not intend to translate them into action. The only thing left, therefore, was to say—what was indeed the truth—that probably the whole affair had been so suddenly arranged that Arthur had not had time to call at Bello Sguardo—and that as regarded herself, Margaret had nothing to be ashamed of, since his attentions had been quite marked and persistent enough to make any girl draw the conclusions from them which she had done. Ethel fancied from Margaret's extreme sensitiveness on this point that the girl's pride was suffering from the supposed slight more than her affections from her lover's absence, and she longed to tell Margaret of Arthur's visit to her, and of his extreme anxiety with regard to Count Bartoloff. On the whole, however, it seemed wiser to be silent, and only to comfort Margaret with hopes of his speedy return.

After this one outburst, Margaret never broke down again; if she shed tears, it was in secret. She never mentioned Arthur Gordon's name, but threw herself with renewed energy into the torrent of entertainments with which Valetta was deluged just before Lent.

About this time Miss Sophy Mainwaring departed in the same steamer with Mr Willcox, having previously promised to be married before a Registrar in London as soon as possible after

their arrival. A ceremony in church was to both of them unnecessary, and as they possessed the courage of their convictions, they decided to dispense with it. The bride intended to resign her professorship, possibly lest the professorship should resign her, but certainly also in order to be free to devote her whole energies to her husband's work. In spite of her peculiarities and her unattractive exterior, she had qualities of real disinterestedness and devotion which Margaret could not help admiring, while her acuteness as a judge of character was also worthy of respect. She, on her part, took sufficient interest in Miss Somers to implore her solemnly to consider if she was leading the life most satisfactory to herself and most beneficial to her fellow-creatures.

"I don't believe you are meant to be a butterfly 'always," said Miss Sophy. "You say you are one of a large family, so you can surely be spared. Don't waste all your youth and all your good looks in flirtations. Do remember how much work there is to be done in the world. Why are you to have all the enjoyment and the others all the hard labour? Remember that you, and your class, are responsible for the prisons and the work-houses. You don't believe it? Well, at least remember what I say, and if you are ever dissatisfied with your life, come to me, and I will put you in the way of doing something better."

Margaret was dissatisfied with her life just then, but she would hardly allow it to herself, and certainly felt no inclination to follow Miss Sophy's line at present, though her conscience sometimes gave uneasy twinges.

On the other hand there was Rosina, who had presented many candles to the altar of the Blessed Virgin in the little Mariner's Church near the Customs House, in order to insure for her brother a safe voyage to Cyprus, but in vain, at least as regards the lad's temporal safety—for he had been drowned off the Syrian coast. So that prayers and devotion also seemed sometimes of no avail in trouble and anxiety.

The trouble was that Margaret was passing through deep waters for the first time in her life, and she did not find the experience pleasant. Like all of us, she had to struggle through them alone. People can help or hinder a little, and sympathy is sweet, but sooner or later each one has to learn the terrible mystery and loneliness of his or her indivisible and unshareable personality.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TONGUE OF SCANDAL

LADY BROWNE was at home every Tuesday afternoon, and on the Tuesday following Arthur Gordon's departure, Isabel Jarvis told her mother that she wished to pay her respects to the General's wife. "I want to go early," she said, "as I particularly wish to speak to her alone, so if you see me talking to her, be sure you talk to some one else, and leave us quiet."

Mrs Jarvis promised to obey her daughter's directions, and the pair set out for the General's house. The walk was a short one, but the weather happened to be very squally, with alternate showers of rain, and gusts of wind which immediately raised the scarcely laid dust, so that it was not without a sprinkling of both rain and dust, with their inevitable results of disarranged laces and disordered feathers, that the two ladies arrived at their destination. They were so early that Lady Browne was not in the drawing-room, and Isabel had time to rearrange her coiffure before the mirror. How-

ever, they were not long kept waiting, for the General entered almost immediately, followed soon after by his wife.

Sir William Browne had served with distinction in most of the campaigns waged by English troops during his lifetime, but his private was not equal to his professional reputation, and there were persons who pitied the pretty Miss Robbins when she was married at eighteen to the old soldier, although he was as much her superior socially as he was in years. She always had the air of being a little afraid both of him and of her surroundings generally, and possibly it was this which had, to a certain extent, placed her at the mercy of Count Bartoloff, who won the General's confidence by judicious flattery before he proceeded to lay siege to the wife's heart.

If Isabel had a virtue, it was that of courage, though it might sometimes be more akin to the bully's bravery than to the hero's. On this occasion she made straight for her victim, and after a few preliminary sentences she began her attack.

"I suppose you know the secret history of Major Martin's mission," she said. "No? Oh! I made sure the General told you everything. What I can't understand is why the Major took that young Gordon with him."

"He is clever, isn't he?" said Lady Browne, seeing she was expected to say something.

Isabel shrugged her shoulders. "I daresay he knows his multiplication table," she said ; "but I am not aware that his abilities are so transcendent that they were obliged to select him rather than a hundred other men. I can't help fancying Lady Maude Beaufoy had something to do with it."

"What do you mean?" asked Lady Browne, beginning to get interested, but glancing round to see if there were any new arrivals.

"Why, you see she has Miss Somers out here in her charge. She is a pretty girl, and I believe hasn't a penny, and Mr Gordon hasn't a penny either. They were carrying on a very marked flirtation, to say the least of it, and I expect Lady Maude gave the authorities a hint that the young man had better be removed."

Lady Browne laughed ; the idea amused her—but Isabel's next words made her start and change colour, so far as rouge and powder would permit.

Miss Jarvis had heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and realised that if she spoke, it must be at once. "It was either Lady Maude or Count Bartoloff," she said, very distinctly ; "I have thought more than once that the Count was jealous of Mr Gordon, and, at any rate, he is making good use of his time now Mr Gordon is gone."

The other visitors were in the room now, but Lady Browne neither saw nor heard them. Between

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her rage at Isabel's implied insult—for the girl's tone was full of meaning—and her terror lest what she said should be true, the poor woman was inarticulate for a moment.

"What—what do you mean?" she stammered at last, her eyes fixed on Isabel's impassive face.

"I mean that I am giving you a warning," said that young lady, in a low voice, but very significantly. "Perhaps I know more than you think," and she turned away to her mother, leaving Lady Browne helplessly standing with her eyes fixed on the floor, utterly unaware of what was going on round her.

Two or three ladies, surprised at not being received by their hostess, had passed on and shaken hands with the General, whose quick eye soon perceived that something was amiss.

"Emmeline!" he said, sharply, and she recovered consciousness sufficiently to go through her duties mechanically.

But all the time she was constantly turning to the door and saying to herself in an agony, "Why doesn't Leo come? Oh! why doesn't Leo come?"

Count Bartoloff's arrival had never been so long delayed before. She began to think he did not mean to come at all, but at last she heard his voice—she knew it a mile off, she said to herself—and he was talking and laughing with some ladies.

A minute later they all came into the room together—Lady Maude, Miss Somers, and the Count. He seemed very attentive, thought Lady Browne. "Oh, the wretch! If it should be true!" She felt almost equal to telling Margaret herself what manner of man he was—and yet, of course, that was impossible. She pulled herself together a little as she shook hands with them. She hardly touched Margaret's, but the girl did not notice that, and passed on into the room.

The Count made his usual low bow, but she knew he could see that she was unlike herself; and he whispered, "I must speak to you alone presently," and then turned aside to other guests.

The room was now nearly full of people who almost all knew each other, and tongues were wagging loudly. The General was trying to make himself agreeable to a few Maltese who did not seem to have many friends, but as they were neither young nor pretty, he found the conversation ragged. There was a good deal of gossip about the little Signorina's illness. It was said that she was homesick, and would not complete her engagement.

"If she does not sing again, she will be a great loss," said one lady; "I hope she will change her mind and stay."

Meanwhile, the General took Lady Maude into another room to have some tea, and as Margaret

was following, Count Bartoloff rejoined her, found her a chair a little apart in the window, and brought her tea and cake. Since the night when he had felt himself repulsed in the Opera House, he had been even more quiet and respectful in his manner to her than before—only on the Marsa, when he told her of Gordon's departure, had he been otherwise than strictly polite and attentive without being *empressé*. He had regretted his few words then, and had never transgressed again.

Margaret had plenty of partners and friends, but she had kept them all at a little distance compared with Arthur Gordon, and when the latter vanished from the scene she might have felt somewhat lonely, had not the Count adroitly slipped into the place as her special cavalier. She was feeling piqued and sore at what she regarded as Arthur's desertion, and her liking for the Count revived; it was difficult to her to think evil of anyone, and she began once more to disbelieve the stories about him. Her own position and character were so absolutely unimpeachable that even Miss Jarvis did not venture to slander her, but no girl can afford to disregard the character of the men whom she allows about her, and Arthur would have been in a fever of anxiety and misery could he have seen the situation into which she was now drifting. Lady Maude ought, of course, to have prevented the possibility of it, but, as has

been seen, her views of her duties as a chaperon were not very strict, being mainly that she should give her charge plentiful opportunities of amusement, so long as they did not interfere with her own enjoyment.

Isabel Jarvis watched it all, and chuckled at the thought that she had opened Lady Browne's eyes.

Meanwhile, Dr Masters and Christopher had been having a conversation which would have considerably startled Lady Maude had she heard it.

Mr Beaufoy had remarked, in his usual calm and nonchalant manner, that he understood people had been gossiping about his attentions to Signorina Bianchi, and that he intended shortly to leave Malta with her and his agent, and be married quietly to her at the first opportunity.

"By Jove!" said the doctor, "you do?"

"I meant to have married her here," continued Christopher, unmoved by Dr Masters' evident surprise, "but a most ridiculous obstacle is in the way. She made some absurd promise of marriage to the Primo Tenore, which, it seems, is legally binding in this eccentric place; at least, if the man gets wind of the wedding, he can put what they call an 'impedimenta' in the way, and no priest would marry us. So we haven't quite settled what to do. Perhaps we shall go over to Sicily and get

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spliced there. The poor child is very nervous and anxious to get it done. I want my mother to receive her here first—I don't mean as my *fiancée* but simply as a guest. It will probably stop the tongues from wagging."

"I should have thought it would make them wag the more."

"Not at all. People will see they have been mistaken. Now, will you be a good fellow, and try if you can work it?"

"I have no influence with Lady Maude," replied the doctor. "She looks upon me as a kind of upper servant, and would as soon think of flying as of taking advice from me except in the form of pills or powders."

"Hm!" said Christopher, "your diagnosis is more or less accurate. I have often wondered that you can stand it. Why do you?"

"As we are telling each other home truths, I don't mind saying that if I were a free man I should leave to-morrow, or rather I should never have come at all; but I have three kids at home who want educating, and a wife who wants new dresses and to be presented at Court. Your mother is generous in her terms, if not always in her treatment, and it is a good holiday. So here I am."

"I comprehend. The upshot of it all is, that wives are an expensive luxury, and that is why I want to get my mother to look kindly on Maddalena.

People suppose me to be very rich, but the bulk of the property is hers, and she can do what she likes with it. We should not be paupers, of course, but we should have to live carefully, as people say, which is almost worse, to my mind."

"What made you such a fool?"

"Don't ask me! I didn't make myself. However, in this particular instance I don't allow that I am a fool. I am fond of the girl, and I believe she will make me a good wife. So think it over, and make up your mind to do the best for me that you can. I do really believe my mother has a sneaking regard for your judgment, though she would not allow it for worlds. Good-night."

CHAPTER XV

THE CANON ARRIVES

CANON CURTEIS' arrival had been more than once postponed, but at length, the week before the Carnival, he came.

Lady Maude fussed greatly over the arrangements of furniture, writing-materials, and pictures in the room she had prepared for him. "He is very High Church, my dear," she said to Margaret, "so I have bought these sacred prints on purpose. Don't you think he will like them? Then there is this carved Swiss cross. I never know where to put it, but I have not liked to throw it away, because it was given me by a dear friend when I was a girl. Don't you think the Canon would like it on his writing-table? I have put two or three religious books on the table too. I suppose he never touches a novel. I hope he won't be shocked at the books downstairs. I am always so afraid of not doing quite the right thing with those kind of people. One never knows what they will approve of. Will he expect to have

family prayers, do you think? I think I shall say I am not strong enough to get up early. He is a most delightful man, you know, a charming companion and a perfect gentleman. His mother was related to someone, I can't remember whom."

Margaret smiled, but inwardly quaked a little at the idea of this very superior person who might object to so many things. Even she could lay her finger on more than one point where the household showed at least to doubtful advantage, and what would a very High Church Canon think? Her acquaintance with the clergy was restricted to a few country parsons who rode bicycles and played tennis, and if they were not fresh from College (in which case they were usually prigs), had large families of somewhat ill-dressed daughters. They were highly respectable persons, but not at all alarming, and not at all like Canon Curteis. To her surprise, Ethel expressed great delight at his arrival.

"I have known him ever since I was a child," she said. "He is a great friend of my people's, and always very good to me, though we differ in so many things. I am sure you will like him, Margaret. Don't heed Cousin Maude's foolish talk."

Nevertheless, the girl did think at first that Canon Curteis was a very alarming person, and though this impression wore off a little as she

knew him better, there always remained a certain sense of awe. It was not that he was very grave, or stood on his dignity, or talked of solemn subjects ; but rather that he had a curiously *impersonal* manner, as if it were not any special man or woman to whom he was speaking, but simply a fellow-creature or, perhaps, rather, a *soul*. It did not signify if you were rich or poor, old or young, fair or ugly ; you felt he was hardly conscious of anything exterior, but that he could surely tell at once if your soul were pure or foul ! The one thing which you felt he could never pardon was any attempt at deception or concealment, and perhaps it was owing to Ethel Mainwaring's transparent honesty that she never lost his friendship, though she strayed so far from the fold of his Church. On the other hand, Lady Maude, although his hostess, always remained at a certain distance. With her the sense of truth hardly existed ; she romanced habitually without ever being aware of it, so that any statement she made required verifying before it could be accepted. Margaret had at first been perplexed and shocked, but she noticed that Lady Maude's friends took her exaggerations as a matter of course, although the good lady would have been much astonished herself, had anyone ventured to doubt her veracity.

The Canon's theological attitude was another matter of surprise to Margaret in her inexperience.

She had been brought up in a rather strict Anglican atmosphere, without much dogmatic instruction indeed, but yet on the understanding that the English Church occupied a narrow plank of truth, surrounded on every side by quagmires of error. She had heard of beautiful Roman Catholic services to which people went in order to hear the music, and the atmosphere of St John's—almost the only Maltese Church she had entered—could not fail to impress her naturally reverent mind; but the idea of joining in Roman Catholic worship had never seriously occurred to her until she saw this English clergyman going regularly to Mass as part of his daily duty. She was perplexed, but much too shy to ask his reasons, and it was only by slow degrees that they dawned upon her. As, however, they do not directly affect our story, I will not enter upon them here.

Christopher Beaufoy had had his way, and Signorina Bianchi had been invited to Bello Sguardo. The day fixed for the luncheon party was that following Canon Curteis' arrival, and as Lady Maude was, according to her habit, greatly occupied with her new guest, the little Italian lady escaped with a less severe scrutiny than she might otherwise have received. She came with her aunt, and was very nervous, hardly speaking at first, and eating scarcely anything. Lady Maude had insisted on inviting Sir William and Lady Browne

also, and Isabel Jarvis had been racking her brains how to find a means of joining the party herself, but even her wits had not been equal to forcing a way through Lady Maude's closed door, uninvited. The only other additions, therefore, were Colonel Thompson (Mrs Thompson would not leave Harry) and Colonel Morrison.

The table was noisy enough, with Lady Maude and Sir William Browne at one end, and Lady Browne and Mr Beaufoy at the other, though the rest of the party were unusually silent.

Canon Curteis sat on Lady Maude's left. He looked ill, and spoke but seldom, but perhaps he saw more than would have been supposed from his apparent aloofness. Margaret was by Mr Mainwaring, with whom she never exchanged more than a few spasmodic remarks. Ethel took compassion on the little Signorina, thought her desperately afraid of Christopher, on whose left she was placed, and tried to encourage her by talking of the triumphs she had had in the Opera, and the universal regret expressed at her withdrawal from the stage. The prima donna stammered thanks, but seemed absolutely incapable of raising her eyes from her plate.

Christopher was far more lively than usual—Margaret had never seen him exert himself so much before—but his attention was almost entirely devoted to Lady Browne.

"What dress are you going to wear at the Carnival ball?" he asked her. "Someone told me you had chosen a Russian peasant's costume."

Lady Browne coloured crimson. "It was Miss Jarvis who said that, I should think," she replied; and then wished she had bitten her tongue out rather than have uttered such a remark.

"What a little fool she is," thought Beaufoy, but aloud he said: "Miss Jarvis is given to romancing. I often wish I could hear her and my mother's account of the same event. I do not think anyone would recognise either as what really happened. Women are much cleverer than men, Lady Browne; we never make the small incidents of our life so interesting as you ladies do."

"I don't think Miss Jarvis is really clever," persisted Lady Browne. "She is only spiteful."

"No doubt her invention as to your dress was stupid," said Christopher, calmly. "What are you really going to wear?"

"Oh, I shall not tell you. It spoils all the fun if everyone knows beforehand. You must look out and see if you can recognise me."

"I don't think I shall go," said Beaufoy, relapsing into his languid manner. "I hate dancing and I loathe crowds."

"Oh! you must come. There is always plenty of room at the Palace for quiet flirtations. I will keep a dance to sit out with you. There!"

Christopher bowed and turned for the first time to his other neighbour. "You are eating nothing," he said in French.

"*Je n'ai pas faim,*" murmured the Signorina.

"That is not flattering to our cook. You ought always to be able to eat from greediness. *Allons ! qu'y a-t-il ?*" he said in a lower voice.

The change from the bright mocking little creature he had first known was so great that it filled him with anxiety lest she should never recover from the ravages caused by the Maltese climate and the excessive exertions which the love of her profession had induced her to make, even beyond her strength. Christopher Beaufoy was selfish and self-indulgent, but he had some heart left. His attachment to the little actress was sincere, as he was about to prove by the sacrifices he must necessarily make in marrying her ; and the very fact that he was capable of making those sacrifices showed that he had the capacity of rising to an altogether higher level.

After luncheon the whole party strolled out into the garden, and drank their coffee on the lower terrace among the palms and orange trees, but shortly afterwards the two Colonels departed, and the rest of the party divided into twos and threes. Dr Masters took possession of Lady Browne, and Christopher of the Signorina, while Ethel and the duenna, both afraid of the fresh air, returned to the

drawing-room. The old Italian lady was not a lively companion, and so naturally fell to Ethel's share.

Canon Curteis talked to them for a few moments and then slipped away. Sir William Browne was still devoting himself to his hostess, and Mr Mainwaring was absorbed in a book. Margaret was therefore alone, and was walking slowly along the stone path with her eyes on the ground when she found herself face to face with Count Bartoloff.

He stopped short, with his usual ceremonious bow, and then turned to accompany her.

"It was cruel of Lady Maude not to invite me when she had a party," he said, "but you see I knew you would be at home, so I came to pay my respects. If I may venture to say so, you have not the air of amusing yourself too much."

Margaret laughed. "To tell you the truth, I was wondering if Lady Maude would be free in time to take me down to the Marsa this afternoon, but I am afraid there is no chance."

"The match is postponed till to-morrow," said the Count; "the ground was too wet to-day."

"I do not think I can go to-morrow," said Margaret, doubtfully; "I have arranged to ride up to Bighi with Colonel Thompson and enquire how Mr Barclay is."

"Mr Barclay is better," replied the Count, *promptly*. "I heard to-day at the Club. Write to

Colonel Thompson that you postpone your ride. It will be a good match; it is a pity that you should miss it. I go back to Valetta; I will leave your letter at his house."

"Very well," said Margaret, turning to go indoors.

Count Bartoloff laid a gently detaining hand on her arm. "Pray, not yet," he said.

Margaret drew her arm a little away—she did not like being touched.

"I apologise," he said, humbly; "I cannot recollect the English customs. One may shake hands, one may give the arm, but one may not kiss a lady's hand, or——"

"That will do," said Margaret, smiling, and blushing a little. "Now tell me about the Carnival ball. What are you going to wear?"

"I go in my ancient national costume," he replied. "You would look admirable as a Russian Court lady. I happen to have the dress by me. Will you permit me to send it to you, just that you may try how you like it?"

"Oh! thank you very much," she said, hastily, "but my people are going to send me something from home."

At that moment Lady Browne and Dr Masters came round the corner, and greetings were exchanged. When they moved on again, Lady Browne went first with the Count.

"Here you are again with this girl," she muttered, between her teeth.

"You are ungrateful, my love," was the unperturbed reply. "Did I not hear you were lunching at Bello Sguardo? Did I not follow as soon as decency would permit? Can I help talking to Miss Somers, if I find her alone in the garden? You perceive I leave her for you at the first opportunity."

"It is all very well to talk like that, but I cannot endure the girl, and you know it. This life is killing me, Leo. I must go home."

"Have I not often said the same? Let us go together. It is the easiest thing possible. A domino in the Carnival—a carrozze—a steamer. *Voilà tout!*"

"Oh, it is easy enough to go, I know," she said, bitterly, twisting her hands in misery, "and it would be easy enough for *you* to come back, but what would become of *me*?"

"Well, Miss Somers," said Dr Masters, "what do you think of the prima donna? A pretty little person, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Margaret, indifferently, her eyes fixed on the pair in front. "She is rather pretty, but I never saw anyone so shy. She seems never to have been in society at all. She looks happier now, though," she added, glancing at a seat on *the upper terrace*, where Christopher and Signorina

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Bianchi were sitting at a respectful distance from each other.

She would have been surprised could she have overheard their conversation at that moment.

"Then it is settled, Maddalena," said Christopher. "Don't get frightened at the last minute, and don't tell your aunt, or your maid, or anyone. The first night of the Carnival on which a steamer starts for Sicily, while every one is dancing, and then the first *padre* we can find, eh?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE MARSA

THE polo match took place on the following day and attracted a large number of spectators. Lady Maude, Canon Curteis, and Margaret drove on to the ground just as the play had begun, and friends and acquaintances soon surrounded the carriage. The crowd was a characteristic one. The Governor was walking about in a light grey suit, trying to look amiable, but seeming very much bored. It was his last year of office; he was tired, and longing for his relief to come out. The Admiral, vigorous and bustling, was everywhere at once, criticising the riders, chaffing the ladies, and apparently without a care, though he had been spending the morning writing a most anxious and important despatch to the First Lord.

The General at once came up to Lady Maude, and was followed by his wife, who began eagerly to beg her and her son to dine with them the following day.

"It is very short notice, I know," said Lady

Browne, casting half-frightened glances behind her as she spoke, "but I have been obliged to get up a dinner in a great hurry, and to ask some dreadful people to it, and it would be *so* kind if you and Mr Beaufoy would come. You are always such a help. Miss Somers will excuse me, I know, if I don't invite her too, but I'm afraid I haven't room."

Lady Maude had no engagement the following evening and was delighted to make one. But Christopher, she knew, was dining out. Should she bring Canon Curteis instead?

Lady Browne was most happy.

"Now tell me, my dear, who the 'dreadful people' are," said Lady Maude.

"Don't repeat it, pray," said Lady Browne, in a whisper. "They are a Mrs and Miss Jarvis. The mother is a quiet, inoffensive old thing, but the daughter gives me no peace till I ask her, and I may as well get it over."

"I never invite people unless I like them," said Lady Maude. "However, I will come, on condition you don't let her talk to me. I have avoided her carefully all the winter. She tried hard to get an introduction to me, but I don't intend to be forced into knowing her."

Margaret overheard the remark, and smiled as she thought of how Miss Jarvis had compelled Christopher to present her to his mother on

Christmas Day. But she said nothing. Indeed, the statement was nearer the truth than many made by Lady Maude, who had certainly persistently avoided Miss Jarvis all the winter.

Lady Browne went on talking about other matters, and was answering some question of Canon Curteis' when she suddenly broke off in the middle and seemed to lose the thread of what she was saying. Count Bartoloff had just come up to the other side of the carriage, and was asking Margaret if she would not get out for a little while and see the ponies nearer. The girl was glad to move, and turning to Lady Maude, said :

"I may go, mayn't I? I sha'n't be long," and hardly waiting for an answer, sprang lightly out.

Lady Browne made somewhat abrupt adieux and left the carriage almost at the same moment, but she did not join the pair, who walked rather quickly towards the starting-point.

"Do you dine at Lady Browne's to-morrow?" asked Count Bartoloff.

"I am not asked," said Margaret, "but I heard her inviting Lady Maude and Mr Beaufoy."

"What a misfortune for me!" exclaimed the Count. "I had hoped I might have met you there. A dinner is the only chance of quiet conversation. At dances you are too popular, I find."

The compliment was a little too obvious, but *there was something* in the foreign accent and the

general air with which it was spoken that seemed to make it pass.

Count Bartoloff thought he was making very slow progress with this young lady, and began to wonder whether he should ever arrive. He was obliged, on the one hand, to use circumspection lest he should offend Lady Browne too bitterly, since for reasons of his own he wished to retain that lady's friendship; and on the other hand, he continually found himself brought up short by Margaret herself at the very moment when he thought he was making some advance. He had received such a check on the previous day, when the girl had instinctively shrunk from his touch, and it was with satisfaction that he noticed she only smiled at his remark about the dinner. She was such an extremely transparent young person, that he was never in any doubt as to her feelings at the moment, but he was anxious to be rather more secure of his footing before the return of Arthur Gordon, who, he thought, might now be back any day. Besides, the length of his own stay in Malta was uncertain.

As he walked with Margaret across the ground he asked her if she had ever ridden up the valley to Boschetto.

"You do ride sometimes, do you not?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I am very fond of riding. My father makes us all mount a pony almost before we can run. I have been out a few times

with Colonel Thompson, but not very often. Some people bicycle, and I have never learnt to do that : my father is very old-fashioned and would not hear of it when it was all the rage. But I have sometimes wished I could do it, all the same."

"*A la bonne heure !*" exclaimed the Count. "I beg leave to agree with your father. Bicycling is a fashion which has already begun to go out, as lady doctors will, and all the other fads of the nineteenth century. It is not elegant, and nothing about a woman survives except elegance."

"I think it is rather hard to put lady doctors on a level with bicycles," said Margaret, laughing, "but here we are! Oh! how do you do?" She was immediately greeted by several polo-riders who were just about to start.

"Have you heard the news, Miss Somers?" asked a young naval man, as he placed his foot in the stirrup.

"No; what news?" she asked anxiously, for she gathered from his manner that it was bad.

"Poor old Barclay died this morning at half-past eleven."

"Oh! you don't mean it?" she cried, much distressed. "I heard yesterday he was better."

"Better! Oh, no! he had a bad relapse two days ago, and last evening they did not think he would live through the night. He was quite *unconscious* for twelve hours before he died. Poor

chap! it is an awful pity. He was one of the best fellows in the Service. He and Gordon were great friends. Gordon will be awfully cut up when he hears."

He raised his cap and moved off, ready to start when the signal was given.

Margaret's eyes were full of tears. She turned indignantly to her companion. "What did you mean by telling me he was better?" she said.

The Count shrugged his shoulders gently and sadly. "I am very sorry," he said; "I heard it at the Club. And if you had gone to-day, it would already have been too late."

Margaret made no reply, and he saw that she did not believe him.

"I do not care to stay here now," she said; "I will go back to Lady Maude."

"Please let me tell you how grieved I am to have offended you," said the Count, humbly. "If I sinned, it was from my too great desire to see you and be with you and to save you pain. You should not be with the dying, but with the young and happy. Try and pardon me, for I desire to be only your humble servant."

Margaret murmured something which he took to be acquiescence, and he said eagerly:

"If you forgive, promise to come out for a ride with me to Boschetto before the weather changes. Oh! not alone. I will find suitable chaperons—

everything. You are so hard to move, you English ladies. Do not say no. I will obtain permission to-morrow from Lady Maude when I meet her at the General's."

They were now close to the carriage, and Margaret had not spoken again; he raised his hat with a look of indescribable adoration, and left her.

Her mixture of feelings kept her somewhat silent during the rest of the afternoon. On the one side was the distress at Mr Barclay's death; on the other, excitement as to why Count Bartoloff was so anxious to ride with her. Could he really mean to propose to her, she wondered. Well, if so, she had better get it over. She had no intention of marrying him, but she was not without her share of girlish vanity, and there would be some satisfaction to have him at her feet, to feel that she, the eldest of a large family, had the opportunity, if she chose to take it, of becoming a Countess and the wife of a man who seemed to be at any rate very well off. Few girls dislike to feel their power. Margaret knew that if she came home with no adventures to relate, there would be a vague disappointment in the family circle. It would be pleasant to know she had made at least one conquest, even if nothing came of it. To be sure she had once thought that Arthur Gordon cared for her, but he had gone without a word.

This death of poor young Barclay had brought

Arthur Gordon vividly back to her mind. She had been trying to forget him, and imagined she had succeeded, but the death of his friend made her think very pitifully of him, even against her will. The Marsa was now for a second time connected with a painful memory and with Count Bartoloff. The wind seemed to grow more chilly and the sun more dim as she drove home, listening vaguely to Lady Maude's conversation with Canon Curteis.

She heard her describing many of their Malta acquaintances and the Canon's shrewd questions and grave remarks at some of the stories—but all in a kind of dream, her thoughts revolving round the death-bed at Bighi and her Russian lover who had told her a lie in order to prevent her from going there.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLOT

"I CAN'T imagine why I make such a fool of myself with the girl," thought Count Bartoloff to himself, as he walked away from Lady Maude's carriage; "one would almost think I had never been in love before. *Sacrebleu ! que je suis bête.* My only excuse is that they tell me the old lady will give her a handsome dot."

He proceeded to do his best to rectify his folly by immediately seeking out Lady Browne and devoting himself to her for the rest of the afternoon, even under the eyes of Miss Jarvis, for whom he had a supreme contempt, although he knew that for some reason or other the poor Emmeline was terrified whenever she saw her.

"Let us get out of the crowd," said Lady Browne, presently. "What do you say? shall we walk part of the way home? Sir William has gone already, and we should have a little quiet time together."

"There is nothing I should like better," said

the Count ; " I have long wanted to say something to you when no one is by."

They accordingly passed out through the gates and between the rows of waiting carrozzes, and escaping the clutches of the shouting drivers anxious for a fare, they walked along the quiet road towards Floriana.

"What was it you wanted to say to me?" asked Lady Browne at last.

"*Ma mignonne*, I have never yet asked a favour of you, save the greatest favour of all—your love. But now, if you will, you can give me great assistance."

"I! how?" she cried, her woman's soul on fire in a moment at the idea of being of some use to the man she loved.

"It is not easy to say. I have to speak of your husband. You will pardon me if I seem not—not respectful?"

She laughed strangely. "Why! what has come to you? You and I have not been always very careful of the way we spoke of him, have we? You know very well that nothing you can say will hurt me so much as what I know already. Unless, indeed, it should mean open disgrace?" she added, questioningly. "I should not like that, though then people would know what I have had to bear all these years."

"It need not be open disgrace if you will help

me," said the Count, gravely, "but if you do not, I shall be obliged to make a scandal. I am not rich enough to be able to let the General go on borrowing from me without repaying me."

"Does he owe you money? Much?"

"It is a large sum for me, but he will not repay me, and he has locked the proofs away in his secret drawer—the drawer of which the key is always on his watch-chain."

"But how did he get the proofs? Why did you not keep them yourself?"

"It was an act of folly, I allow, but I thought then that he was an honourable man. You know we used to play cards together nearly every night, sometimes at the Club, sometimes at your house. At the Club there are witnesses, but at your house we were often alone. Well, for two or three weeks, perhaps, the luck was on his side, and I always paid. Once I had to borrow at very high interest, but I paid him. Then the luck turned, as happens so often, and he would give me an I.O.U., and say he would draw a cheque next day. But he never did. At last one night we were playing in his room and I won everything. He got up and said he would play no more or he would be ruined. He said, 'Can you wait till I get my pay? I promise yours shall be the first debt I discharge.' I said, 'To show you I trust you, I will give you all these for a fortnight, and then you shall pay me.'

He took me by the hand and said he would never forget my kindness, and he locked the I.O.U.'s all up in his secret drawer. When at the end of the fortnight I told him I had pressing bills to pay, he laughed and said so had he, and I must wait. I cannot wait, Emmeline, I have no money left."

"It is inconceivable!" she exclaimed, passionately. "I thought at least he was true to his own miserable code of honour—I knew he deceived his wife and thought nothing of it, but I did think he paid his gambling debts."

The Count listened anxiously. He thought at first that Lady Browne doubted the truth of his story, but he soon saw that no such idea had crossed her mind, as her next question showed.

"Do you think he can have destroyed the papers?"

"I don't think he would quite dare to do that. At any rate I want to see. If they are gone, then I shall have to consider what to do. If they are there still, I shall have the proofs I want in my hand."

"But how can you possibly get hold of them? The drawer is always locked, and the key on his chain."

"Would it not be possible to get the key off his chain? Does he never leave it about?"

"Sometimes at night he leaves it on his dressing-table; but, you know, he sleeps in his dressing-room, and you could never get in there."

"I could not. No. And I dare ask no one else—unless—oh, Emmeline! *ma bien aimée*, if you would help me? If you will take it?"

"I? Oh, Leo! I dare not!"

"Ah—I thought you would be courageous and help me!"

"But even supposing I did take it," she said, hesitating, "how would you account to him for having got it? Would you tell him I gave it to you?"

"Do you think I would be so base? I will tell him he gave the papers back to me one evening when he had been taking too many whiskies and sodas. You know that happens sometimes."

"Indeed I do," she said, with a look of disgust.

"Then you will take the key off his chain and give it to me?"

She hesitated. "It is a difficult thing," she said. "What excuse should I have, if he caught me in the act?"

"Do it when he sleeps, or if, *par malheur*, he should surprise you, your woman's wit will find an answer. But you must not fail. Remember how much depends on it. If I have to make the whole thing public, I shall not be able to shield you from the miseries of a scandal—such a scandal as would force him to resign his command, and would close the doors of all the clubs to him."

"Well," she said, "I should be able to leave him then. No one would blame me."

"You could not get a divorce for that. You would not be free to marry again."

She paused before replying. Then she murmured, "I am afraid ; he terrifies me so."

"Look at me, beloved," said the Count.

She turned her eyes and met his fixed upon her. Instantly colour suffused her cheeks, she opened her lips, gave a little gasp, and exclaimed : "Yes, I will do it for you."

"And earn my eternal gratitude," he whispered in reply.

They were now close to the avenue of small plane-trees that lead from the Porta Sant' Anna to the English Cemetery. Carrozzes full of people returning from the Marsa began to pass them. One containing Mrs and Miss Jarvis rattled by, the driver lashing his horses furiously in order to get first on to the drawbridge.

"They are a perfectly shameless couple," said Isabel to her mother. "I wonder how much longer it can go on. It is inconceivable that Sir William Browne shouldn't see it. He must have his reasons for appearing to be blind ; the Russian must have him in his power somehow. But I wonder she gets asked out."

Meanwhile Count Bartoloff and Lady Browne walked on quietly together until an empty carrozza

met them, when he placed her in it and went on his way alone. He had persuaded her to do as he wished on a matter which was of vital importance to him, and he was almost inclined to be sorry for the woman who would run such risks at his bidding. She was really entirely in his power. His influence over her was, it is true, chiefly that of the senses. She loved him for the glance of his eye, the upward curl of his moustache, the caressing tone of his voice; his pallor and his slight, upright figure were a joy to her, contrasted with her husband's red face and corpulence. It was this physical admiration which enthralled her, and which no amount of moral delinquency could affect. Emmeline regarded all members of the opposite sex as so many possible objects for flirtation, and their moral qualities, except so far as they affected her personally, were matters of perfect indifference to her. In fact, owing to heredity and training, her moral sense was hardly developed at all. She was annoyed at her husband's infidelities because they injured her self-love, and excessive drinking was repugnant to her natural womanly fastidiousness; but that Count Bartoloff should tell lies or act as her tempter seemed to her no reason for blaming him, so long as he remained attentive and affectionate to herself. Her will was weak, and she was aware that his was strong. She was quite ready

to submit to his dictation so long as she did not compromise herself with society. It was the fear of this which perpetually held her back, and not any dread of evil-doing.

Canon Curteis, already instructed by Lady Maude in all the *cronique scandaleuse* of Valetta, and accustomed to judge people at a glance from their expression and manner, was pretty well aware of the position in which his hostess was placed towards Count Bartoloff, when on the following evening he entered her drawing-room. Indeed, it was on her account that he went to the dinner-party, anxious though he was for quiet and early hours. There was something helpless and appealing about the foolish little woman which made him think it possible that he might at some time or other be of use to her, but in order that this might be so, he must get to know her better.

Isabel Jarvis was one of the early arrivals; she liked to survey the scene from a post of vantage. After her first attempt at intimidating Lady Browne, which had succeeded beyond her expectation, she had never let the poor woman out of her clutches. Veiled threats to proclaim to the world all she knew terrified Emmeline, who never could discover how far the boasted knowledge went. Not being encased in a panoply of innocence, she was in constant dread of having to answer awkward

questions, and Isabel's innuendos kept her in a fever of anxiety. The young lady had been having a very good time in Malta, but she was not satisfied while she was excluded from one or two houses, of which Lady Maude Beaufoy's was one, and she insisted at last on being invited by Lady Browne to dinner to meet Lady Maude herself. How Lady Browne delivered this invitation, and how Lady Maude accepted it, we have already seen.

Mrs Jarvis had been rather chilled by the cold wind at the Marsa, and felt feverish and uncomfortable, so much so that Isabel doubted whether she should bring her out or let her go to bed ; but she decided that it would look better for herself to have a chaperon at a large dinner-party, and that her mother would get no harm during the short carrozze drive, so Mrs Jarvis wrapped herself up, took a large dose of quinine, and came. She and a little Maltese lady, wife of one of the officials, sat neglected in a corner of the drawing-room, unable to converse much, as Mrs Jarvis spoke no Italian, but feeling some comfort from each other's presence.

Isabel was much annoyed at Canon Curteis being substituted for Mr Beaufoy ; she had intended to sit by him at dinner and try whether her fascinations had more effect on him now that the Signorina's were, as she believed, waning. She knew that

Maddalena had been received at Bello Sguardo, and this made her doubt the truth of the reports regarding the *prima donna* and Christopher, which she herself had been largely instrumental in spreading. However, as Mr Beaufoy could not come, there was no help for it, and possibly Captain Jordan, Royal Marines, would propose that evening; he had been very near it several times lately.

Count Bartoloff arrived one of the last, and had only time for a murmured interrogatory of his hostess. "Have you got it?"

She shook her head. "I could not, so soon. You must not be too impatient."

"I can give you till Monday, not later."

"You shall have it by Monday. Will you sit by Miss Jarvis?"

"Why?"

"She wishes it. It will be better to put her in a good temper. You can charm her if you will."

Dinner was announced at that moment. Sir William gave his arm to Lady Maude, and at the opposite end came Lady Browne and the Maltese official. Isabel sat between Captain Jordan and Count Bartoloff, a rather embarrassing position, for she played two perfectly different *rôles* to the two men. To Captain Jordan, whom she intended to marry if he would let her, she wished to appear as

an *ingénue*, devoted to dancing and to all out-of-door occupations, especially bicycling. To Count Bartoloff she posed as a woman of the world, whom nothing could shock, clever and cynical, ready to hear the most *risqué* stories without a blush.

The excitement of acting a part, or two parts at once, made her really almost brilliant at times. Captain Jordan was obviously very much in love, and there is no saying what might have happened after dinner, had not Mrs Jarvis, who had struggled on bravely so far, suddenly collapsed ; she had to be carried fainting out of the room, and then removed as soon as possible to her own house. Isabel was inwardly raging, but she was obliged to appear outwardly concerned for her mother and to accompany her home.

It was hard to have the fruits of her toil snatched from her at the moment of victory.

"You could not have chosen a more unfortunate time to be ill," she said angrily, when her mother was in bed. "You had no business to come, if you felt so bad as all that."

"I am very sorry," said Mrs Jarvis, meekly. "I did my best, and I don't think I ever failed you before."

"It mattered more to-night than it ever did before," said Isabel ; "I believe in another half hour Captain Jordan would have proposed."

"Then he will come and propose to-morrow," said Mrs Jarvis, wearily closing her eyes.

Isabel was not so sure. She knew she was at her best on that particular evening, and that an impulse suddenly checked sometimes never regains its full strength.

CHAPTER XVIII

RUMOURS OF WAR

IF the light-hearted society of Malta could have been taken behind the scenes, there would have been many grave faces and anxious hearts that winter. Affairs in Europe had been for years past growing in complexity. One Power after another took umbrage at the increasing greatness of the British Empire; East, West, and South, in the New and Old worlds, diplomatic relations were strained. England was almost isolated, and the drama of the nineteenth century's early years seemed about to be re-enacted. Yet we were still at peace; no nation had actually dared to throw down the gauntlet. A modern war is such an awful and tremendous affair, and the lessons of 1870-1 were taught with such overwhelming effect, that ever since the great peace of Europe had not been broken, except in its South-eastern corner. The nations were living in armed neutrality, like wild beasts pacing their cages and waiting till the *keepers* should open the doors and let them fly at

each others' throats. The strain on the peoples was so exhausting that from year to year it seemed impossible to prolong it. The peasantry of Russia was in the hands of usurers; German finances no longer showed any elasticity; the population of France had ceased to increase; Italy was almost bankrupt; the United States were struggling with depression of trade, commercial unsoundness, and political jobbery; the Republics of South America continued a series of internecine wars and revolutions, with, of course, disastrous results to their commerce. South Africa was slowly and painfully recovering from the effects of the exhausting struggle between the Boers and British; the small states of South-eastern Europe were unstable, and fed the flame of discontent among the Christian subjects of the Porte. Turkey herself, most sick and sorry of all, had appeared many times to be on the verge of dissolution, but survived to be a constant source of disturbance and anxiety. The body politic seemed everywhere diseased, and the quack doctors—Nihilists, Socialists, Collectivists, Fabians, Protectionists, and many others—were occupied in prescribing divers nostrums, all certain to effect its cure, and in tearing each others' eyes out meanwhile.

Though in a less distressful condition than many Continental nations, England had suffered severely from the depression that had followed on the South

African war; the agricultural interest had never been at a lower ebb, and no royal road could be found to remedy the distress.

Both parties were sincerely anxious to do so, if possible, though their traditional policies as regards the land were diametrically opposed. But the earth—the Mother of all living—refused to support her children; taxes might be imposed or remitted, but it was impossible to farm at remunerative rates. The standard of comfort all through the country was steadily rising, savings-banks' deposits were continually increasing, but thousands of acres went yearly out of cultivation, and the depopulating of the agricultural districts swelled the number of the unemployed in the towns. The rapid rise, moreover, of a powerful and enterprising Power in the far East was causing the greatest anxiety and even alarm among English manufacturers. It was impossible to compete with the goods produced at such low prices while the English workmen's wages remained at their present level, and at the first proposal of lower wages the trades unions immediately threatened a strike. It was obvious to the statesmen and thinking men throughout the country that if things went on in their present direction and at their present rate of progress, there would before long be something very like a dead-lock, with universal panic to follow. If they *had not* had a kind of faith in England's destiny, a

sense that she had weathered many perils and might survive many more, there must have been a feeling very like despair in those who looked forward to the next thirty or forty years, for it was hard indeed to say whence relief could come.

Fortunately there was a general agreement on the necessity of maintaining the country's defences, and, of course, in the first place a powerful navy. The school who laughed at Jingoism and advocated peace at any price was all but dead. Here and there a melancholy survivor declared against fresh territorial advances, or brought home blood-curdling stories of brutal Englishmen's cruel treatment of gentle and unoffending savages; but such persons carried no weight, and their sneers were unheeded. The Empire expanded continually by the mere force of its own weight, and fresh ships were planned and built every year to protect not only our own islands and our colonies, but still more the enormous importations of food stuffs on which England was increasingly dependent, and of which even the temporary stoppage would mean ruin and perhaps death to millions. There were, of course, heated discussions in the newspapers and debates in Parliament as to the particular form of ship to be built, or as to which harbours should be fortified and which existing fortifications modernised; but the actual principle of national defence seemed at

last established and lifted for ever above the domain of party politics.

At the particular moment of which we are writing, matters had become more than usually threatening. The ministers had had a succession of cabinet councils during the winter, and it was generally understood that it was not the consideration of the Budget which had occupied so large a portion of their time. Now, however, Parliament was sitting, and it was very difficult to prevent awkward questions being asked by injudicious followers consumed with curiosity, and still harder to reply to interrogations from the opposite side of the House in such a manner as to appear to give information while really telling nothing.

Foreign Office clerks were kept hard at work while all the world was dining; and their only compensation for cold dinners and broken engagements consisted in the increased importance which attached to them whenever they made their tardy appearance in Society.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Squadron was besieged by telegrams at all hours of the day or night. He never went out without leaving word exactly where he was to be found, and more than once the arrival of a cypher message had brought him back from the Marsa or from a dinner-party. All the captains of the ships in *the harbour* had been privately told that they

might have to sail at a moment's notice to Egypt, the Bosphorus, or Gibraltar, and it was believed that a concerted scheme of operations had been agreed on by the War Office and Admiralty, in which the part to be played by both the Admiral and the General commanding the troops at Malta was carefully laid down.

Sir William Browne made light of the whole crisis, though his own work was heavy enough. If anyone referred to the unsettled state of affairs, he only laughed, and said affairs had always been unsettled, and always would be, and a good thing too, or all the armies would be disbanded, and then what should he do? His own staff were hard-worked, but the officers of the garrison had no extra duties, and no perceptible cloud rested on the Society of Malta during the winter and early spring. There had been a little flutter of excitement, as we have seen, when the two young officers were despatched on their somewhat mysterious errand, but this had soon passed off, and now the subject of the Carnival ball at the Palace absorbed attention, almost to the exclusion of everything else.

The frisky maids and matrons and their cavaliers would have been very much startled, could they have known that a declaration of war was imminent, and that not one of those in authority believed that the next month could pass without its being made.

Margaret Somers, brought up in an inland county, with no near relatives in either Service, knew far more about crops and fat beasts than about ships and guns; but she took an intelligent interest in the new phase of life presented to her at Malta, with its official atmosphere and its ever-present uniforms. Her friendship with Colonel Thompson on the one hand, and Arthur Gordon on the other, had familiarised her with the externals and everyday life of officers in both the army and navy, but Colonel Thompson treated her too much as a child to discuss foreign politics with her, and Arthur Gordon was himself not high enough up in the Service to hear more than vague rumours of disturbances, to which he attached little credit.

A naval officer learns very young to bear responsibility and to take action himself in the absence of his superiors, but he is rarely admitted into the atmosphere of high politics until he is posted a captain, or even until he reaches Flag-rank. Subordination and discipline leave little opportunity for that troublesome monosyllable 'Why?' without which politics could hardly exist at all.

Thus Margaret was no better prepared than any other woman in Valetta for the outbreak of war. She had heard Count Bartoloff sneer at Arthur Gordon's mission, and was inclined to

ridicule it herself ever since the first shock of hearing of his departure had forced her to betray her secret to Ethel, if not to others.

She believed now that she had really conquered her folly, but she still shrank a little from too much intimacy with Ethel, to whom she had confided it, or with other friends, such as Mrs Thompson, who knew and were fond of Arthur. But little Harry had twined himself too tightly round her heart to be displaced, and she never let more than a day or two pass without seeing him, even though he was now daily increasing in strength and able to go out of doors.

On the morning following the polo match, Margaret had gone into Valetta to take the little boy out for a walk. His great joy was to go through the arch in Strada Reale and to stand close to the parapet in order to watch the train start. He often persuaded his nurse or his mother to time his walk so that he should see either the arrival or departure of this wonderful train, but he would have waited an hour rather than miss the sight. The juvenile population of the town fully shared his tastes, and there was usually a considerable sprinkling of elders also, so that quite a little crowd might have been daily seen with heads hanging over the parapet and eyes greedily devouring the delectable vision of the railway train and platform in the cutting below. There was

quite enough snorting of the engine, banging of doors, and shouting of porters to have started a luxurious mail express on a journey across a continent, instead of a poor little Maltese train with its uncomfortable carriages crawling and rattling for a dozen miles at a rate which a good carrozze could easily beat. But the children were not critical; Harry found a good place quite close to the balustrade, and next him was Lady Browne's little girl with her mother, who began talking to Margaret.

"Did you hear of the suicide last evening?" she asked.

"No; what suicide?"

"Some poor woman threw herself over this wall just when the last train was coming in. She was fearfully crushed; they took her to the Hospital, but I believe they have not found out who she was."

Margaret shuddered. "She was quite dead?"

"Oh yes! she would have anyhow been killed by the fall, but the train went right over her too. I should think she would have been hardly recognisable."

"I can't think how any woman ever has the courage to kill herself," said Margaret.

"Oh, can't you?" said Lady Browne. "I can. It depends on how much one suffers."

The children seemed absorbed in watching the

train, but Harry had heard every word, and as he and Margaret walked on again, he said :

"Summie! why do people die?"

Margaret felt any possible reply was too complicated for a child's understanding, so she answered rather feebly, "I don't know. Ask your mother."

"Why did that woman throw herself over?"

"I don't know. It was very wicked of her——"

"Oh! Mr Barclay's dead. He didn't throw himself over."

"No, poor Mr Barclay. He died from the fever."

"I know. I had the fever too. I was nearly dead too. Nurse said so."

"Well, you are much better now," said Margaret, anxious to change the subject.

But Harry pursued it. "I want to see someone what's dead. Nurse says Mr Barclay's dead up at the Hospital. Will you take me?"

"Oh, no, certainly not!" she cried, hastily.
"Now, Harry, tell me where you went yesterday."

"I don't remember. When am I going to come to tea with you?"

"You may come to-morrow if you like. Only if other people are there, perhaps I shan't be able to talk to you much."

"Oh, well, if you won't be cross I'll come; don't look cross, Summie."

"Do I look cross? I'm very sorry."

"Yes. You usen't never to look cross, but you do now. You look like nurse does when I wake her up in the night."

"Well, I'll promise to try and not look cross when you come to-morrow, if you'll be a very good boy."

CHAPTER XIX

RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

THE next day was Sunday. Margaret had been early to service in the English Church near Bello Sguardo, and on her return she found the whole party at breakfast, with the exception of Canon Curteis, who was in Valetta.

Lady Maude was in high spirits, describing all the details of the dinner-party at the General's ; she remembered accurately all the dresses and jewels, and finished with the self-congratulatory remark that from beginning to end she had not addressed one word to Isabel Jarvis.

"You will have to enquire how the poor old lady is, mother," said Christopher, when he heard of Mrs Jarvis' attack of faintness.

"You may go," said Lady Maude ; "I don't go near the place. I have no doubt Miss Isabel will be delighted to see you."

"She is a very exhausting person," responded Mr Beaufoy ; "I don't think I feel equal to her to-day."

"By-the-by, Margaret," continued Lady Maude, "I begin to think you have really made a conquest of the Count. He was excessively polite to me yesterday, and at last I found it was because he wanted you to have a ride with him to-morrow."

Margaret flushed. It was rather trying to have her 'conquest' proclaimed so publicly.

"Well! do you want to go, my dear?" said Lady Maude.

"It is a riding picnic up to Boschetto, I think," replied Margaret. "Yes, I should like to go if it is fine."

"I suppose I can trust you," said her chaperon, amiably; "so you can tell the Count I have given my consent, when he comes to tea this afternoon."

"Is he coming?" asked the girl, looking up hastily.

"So he said. It appears he cannot let another twenty-four hours pass without seeing you. Really you are a most exciting young lady to take out. I shall have to write to your mother."

This was intolerable, with Ethel's eyes on her from one side, and Christopher's from another. Poor Margaret blushed and fidgeted, and sought in vain for a rejoinder. Ethel, who pitied her, made a diversion.

"Did you know that Canon Curteis preaches to-day at the Garrison Church, Cousin Maude? You

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ought to take Margaret to hear him. I believe his sermons have a great reputation."

"I will," said Lady Maude; "we will order the carriage early, so that we may get good seats."

There was no crowd, however, though the little church was fairly filled with well-dressed women and uniforms. The service was, as usual, brisk and rather noisy, the military brass band leading the chants and hymns, which were simple, and heartily sung by the soldiers, who lounged and whispered through the prayers.

The preacher's appearance attracted some attention; he was very thin, with eyes sunken and yet full of light, and a high, domed forehead; his voice, too, was sweet and penetrating, though it sounded fatigued and strained. But the sermon, a carefully reasoned argument based on a detailed interpretation of the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, was too long for the majority of the congregation, who began to fidget and yawn, and looked up, expecting the signal to rise, when there came a slight pause at last. But Canon Curteis had not quite finished yet; he pushed his papers a little on one side, and with a sort of sweep of his hands over the upturned faces below him, began again, somewhat abruptly. "And now you will go home, to your houses, your barracks, your ships, and you will think no more about these Wicked Husbandmen; or, if you do, you will smile and shrug your

shoulders, and say, 'How appropriate the sermon was to A, and to B, and to C, I hope they will take it to heart'; and you will never see that the lesson is for *you*, and *You*, and *YOU*. Who are these wicked husbandmen? They are those who *refuse their King*. They will be independent. They will live their own life—a life of frivolity, of amusement, or of family love, of money-making—by fair means or foul,—of ambition, of physical courage, of mental discipline and high learning and fine art, of hard labour, of philanthropy, of instructing others, of obeying or of commanding; a life despised or respectable, reckless or law-abiding—but a life self-centred, revolving round those three words, 'we will not.'

"In the Name of my Master, I adjure you all, men and women, soldiers and sailors, go home and consider, this last Sunday before Lent begins, round what centre *your* life revolves. Remember that there is a higher life, the life of self-sacrifice, without which no truly great deeds are possible. The Wicked Husbandmen rejected their King. What did the King do? *He destroyed them, and He gave the vineyard to others*. There is a time when God's outraged honour asserts itself. The laws of Nature, which are the laws of God, are absolutely inflexible. For a time man may appear to ignore them with impunity, but punishment will *surely* come at last. The drunkard, the impure,

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aye, the merely selfish, self-centred man or woman, cannot work in the vineyard. The vines must be tilled, the grapes gathered, the wine pressed out, but not by the Wicked Husbandmen. They are destroyed, and their places taken by others. So God's work must be done, as physical, mental, moral evolution slowly takes place; but the unfit, those who will not be evolved, are passed over and crushed out. You are given the choice, and you are making it every hour of your lives. Make it once for all, by a solemn act of renunciation, to-day. He that saves his life shall lose it; he that loses it, that abandons it to God and his fellow-men, shall save it unto life eternal."

Lady Maude waited to bring Canon Curteis back in her carriage.

"I am sure you must be tired after such a long sermon," she said, when he appeared.

"Was it long?" he said; "I did not intend it to be."

"Oh! not too long!" she replied, hastily; "it was most delightful all through." (She had been asleep for three-quarters of the time.) "It is such a treat to hear a good preacher sometimes. There is so little eloquence among our younger clergy."

"We are not an eloquent nation," said Canon Curteis, politely, though he looked, Margaret thought, almost too tired to talk. "You will find

much more natural flow of language among Italians, for instance; and it is hard to expect young curates to turn out two or three finished essays a week, as they have to do in so many English parishes. The Roman Church seems to me wiser. She does not provide for such an unceasing flow of sermons: she encourages those who have special gifts to preach, and the rest to keep silence; and a sermon, instead of being a twenty minutes' written essay, sandwiched into the Liturgy or Prayers, becomes a special function, to which people go, prepared to listen for an hour without fatigue." He leant back in his seat after this, and left Lady Maude's prattle almost unanswered. Margaret wondered if he felt any surprise or disappointment at the good lady's entirely unimpressed frame of mind. Margaret herself would have gladly asked him some question on matters which perplexed her, but could not do so before a third person, and was too shy to seek an opportunity.

Ethel, however, who was very anxious about the girl's prospects, especially as regarded her acquaintance with Count Bartoloff, thought she would take the first occasion that offered of talking the matter over with Canon Curteis, and during the afternoon she found herself alone with him in the drawing room, and began at once. He listened quietly *to all she had to say*, asked a few questions

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as to Margaret's bringing-up and as to what was known of the Count's antecedents, and promised to see if he could in any way caution or influence her.

"Very likely she would attend to you," said Ethel. "I dare not interfere again. She did not like it last time. I can't help fancying that she attributes my dislike of that man partly to an elder woman's jealousy of her triumphs; she has been shy of me ever since she confided to me some special troubles a few weeks ago, and I believe she takes to the Count chiefly out of pique, because she believes herself badly treated by another man. It is so fearfully hard to help even the people one is fondest of!"

"Yes," said Canon Curteis, "very often the only way is to pray for them."

"And you see that consolation is denied me," said Ethel, her eyes full of tears. "I miss it so much that sometimes I think in my old age I shall come back to it. One's standpoint alters so quickly. I see things quite differently now to what I did ten years ago. It is not so much that one's views of things change, as that one's view does—one's colouring, so to say, like the red and blue glass in a Swiss belle-vue, through which one looks at a waterfall."

"All changes, except the One Immutable," he replied. "We look through the coloured glass,

through our blue or red spectacles. He sees things as they are."

"The noumenon behind the phenomenon," said Ethel, thoughtfully. "I wish I could believe that. To me the world is all phenomena, and the effect is like an endless procession in a circus—it makes one giddy. In youth, of course, judgments are apt to be more *a priori*, and less from experience, and as one grows older, one fancies one gets wiser; but how can I tell I am not losing as much as I gain? It is quite obvious that after a certain point decay sets in, but I can't feel satisfied that all along the improvement we think we detect is not merely the shifting the scenery to suit our position; we are focussing our vision differently, and we fondly imagine every change is an advance, but I can't see any finality in it."

"There is not meant to be finality here," he answered; "there is education of first one faculty and then another, but the end is not here, but on the other side of the river."

"But I am afraid we go round in a circle," said Ethel. "We change as individuals and as nations, but whether we progress or not is a very different question. Each age has an altered way of looking at things, but what proves that the twentieth century sees more clearly than the twelfth? I am almost sure that it is one unending round—birth, youth, maturity, decay, death—with nations as

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with men, and I suppose with planetary systems and universes too. How can one dare to deceive oneself with the idea of advance, as if existence were a straight line to some definite goal !”

“Some people think so still,” he answered, gently.

CHAPTER XX

A SINGED MOTH

THE conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Ford with the tea, followed by Lady Maude.

"Do you know what has become of Lawrence?" asked Ethel.

"He went off with Dr Masters and Margaret to fetch little Harry Thompson," replied Lady Maude. "You were lying down when they started, and he would not disturb you. I have been asleep too. Why is one always so much more tired on Sunday than any other day? I thought they would all have been back long ago. If Harry was my child, I should not let him go out so late, after the illness he has just got over. But people know their own business best; I never give my advice unasked. Oh! there is a bell—I expect that is Margaret's Count."

"Oh, Cousin Maude! pray don't call him that. If anyone heard you, they would think it was all settled between them, and I am certain it will *never* come to anything."

"I am not at all sure. I believe the child likes him. He seems a very agreeable man."

"But we know nothing whatever about him——"

"I have no doubt we could find out. He came with very good introductions to Sir William Browne from the Russian ambassador, I think, or somebody equally official and important. However, here he is. How d'you do, Count Bartoloff? We were talking about you, and wondering what part of Russia you come from——"

The Count bowed, and said he was much honoured. "Do you know Russia?" he asked.

Lady Maude shook her head.

"My family belong to the South, the Caucasus. But I have no estates there now; I am a wanderer. My opinions are not in favour in high quarters at Petersburg, so it is best for me not to return. It is a misfortune for a man not to be able to serve his country."

He looked round at Ethel as he spoke. She was studying him attentively.

"It is, indeed," she replied. "Patriotism seems to me almost a man's highest virtue."

"There is one higher still—the love of mankind," he answered. "Before this century is over, I firmly believe there will be little room for patriotism. The barriers of language and distance are breaking down and the wars will be between classes, not nations."

"We shall not come to the end of wars between nations, even in Europe," said Canon Curteis, "so long as a corrupt despotism, alien to all the surrounding civilisations, remains in the South-East."

"You are quite right," said the Count, "though so few people realise it in your country. It is England's traditional policy to support Turkey, but your statesmen make a great mistake. You are afraid of insurrections in India, but Turkey crushed would really reduce your dangers there, for it would make the Mahometans less boastful and confident of their strength. Besides, the Hindoos will never again combine with the Mussulmans against you. You are beginning to see that Russia does not want India. Our Empire advances in Central Asia, just as yours does wherever you come in contact with half-civilised or savage tribes, but we do not want Hindustan. We need an outlet to the ocean, it is true, but if you would stand aside when we take Constantinople, all the rest might be arranged. England and Russia as friends would rule the world. As enemies, they are likely before long to shed torrents of blood."

The door had opened while he was speaking, and Margaret, leading little Harry, had come in very quietly. The Count did not appear to see her until he had finished his sentence, but Ethel doubted whether he was not in reality fully aware of the rapt look of attention on the girl's face as

she listened. Harry went round the room solemnly, shaking hands with everyone, and then with equal solemnity settled down to his tea.

"I hope you won't mind, Lady Maude," said Margaret; "I have promised to keep Harry for to-night. Mrs Thompson did not like him to be out after dark, and he was so much disappointed at the idea of not coming at all, that I said he should sleep in my room. You won't be a trouble to anybody, will you, Harry?"

"You must wash me and dress me," said the child.

"Of course I will," said Margaret. "I shall love it."

"Did you hear when Mr Barclay is to be buried?" asked Ethel.

"Yes, to-morrow, in the Naval Cemetery. His father is on his way out. They hope he will come in time, but they say it cannot be postponed."

"They've made a big hole for him already," said Harry. "Nurse sawn it. So big"—he stretched his arms wide out. "If the fever had made me dead, my hole wouldn't have been not half as big. Nurse says so."

"Don't let him dwell on such subjects," said Dr Masters, who had just entered; "it is not good for him. He will get morbid, and he is quite nervous enough already. Where is that top? Come and look, Harry."

"So I may have the honour of escorting you to Boschetto to-morrow?" said Count Bartoloff to Margaret, in a lower voice.

"I shall like to come very much," she replied ;
"where are we all to meet?"

"I thought just outside Porta Sant' Anna would be a good rendezvous. Would half-past two suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"And you will allow me to come and fetch you a few minutes earlier?"

"Oh, thank you! but I don't the least mind riding that little way alone."

"You will not be cruel," he said, sinking his voice lower, "and refuse me such a slight favour?"

Margaret did not reply. She was filled with a curious sense of embarrassment. When with the Count, she usually fell a victim to his fascinations. When he was not there, she often thought of him with repugnance, and the mention of Mr Barclay revived her feelings of distrust. She was half sorry now that she had promised to ride with him, but she did not know how to draw back. Perhaps, she thought, she would make the excuse of a bad headache at the last minute. And yet, she was curious to know exactly what he would say and do. She could not bring herself to believe that he was really deeply in love with her, or that her refusal would cause him

much pain. No one had actually proposed to her as yet ; it would be an interesting experience. How thrilled Francie would be when she received her letter relating it !

All this passed in a moment through her mind, while she poured herself out a cup of tea, and at that moment Harry and a moth made a diversion. The child, after playing a little with Dr Masters and the top, had returned to the tea-table, and a large white moth flew against the shade of a lamp that stood near, and then almost into Harry's face. He started back, and cried out, "Oh, do kill him, Summie !"

But Margaret hated killing creatures, and shrank back from the moth, which had singed one of his wings. "He won't hurt, Harry," she said ; "come away from the lamp."

Ethel, however, who was seated at a little distance, quietly took the insect between her fingers, and crushed it ; and Harry was pacified. "How can you ?" said Margaret, with a little shudder. "I *can't* touch a half dead thing."

"It was best to put an end to it," said Ethel ; kindest for itself. "You wouldn't do for a hospital nurse, Margaret."

"No, indeed ! Why should you ?" said the Count, in a low voice ; and Margaret, who had been feeling rather ashamed of herself, looked at him and smiled.

He left soon after, with a fresh reminder of the

appointment for the next day, and Margaret took Harry upstairs and put him to bed. The child did not like to be left alone until he was asleep, and while she sat in the room waiting, Ethel came to the door and asked if she might come in. She went to the child's bed and bent over him with a hungry look in her eyes; then she sat down by Margaret, and taking her hand, said, "You are a lucky girl to have that little creature so fond of you. You will make a splendid mother some day. I think your children will have a good time."

"You take a good deal for granted," answered Margaret, laughing softly. "How do you know I am ever going to marry?"

"You are so attractive that you are almost sure to do so, unless something or other goes very wrong."

"How do you mean?" asked the girl, quickly.

"Well, of course, sometimes love affairs are altogether mismanaged. Mine, for instance, very nearly came to grief. My people would not hear of my marrying Lawrence for a long time, and unless I had been very certain of my own mind and had stood very firm, it would never have come to anything, and I should have been an old maid to this day."

"You might have married someone else."

Ethel shook her head. "It was Lawrence or nobody," she said. "Remember I was no longer very young, and I had never intended to marry

at all. I think quite a young girl finds it much easier to be fond of anyone who likes her, and to accommodate herself to her husband's ways and wishes. The older one grows, the more difficult it becomes to give up one's own ideas, and so if a girl does not marry quite young, her chance seems to me to diminish every year, not so much that she gets less attractive—she often does quite the contrary—as that she herself gets more particular.”

“Then your moral is, that I ought to marry as quickly as possible,” said Margaret, with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Oh, my dear, I didn't mean that at all!” exclaimed Ethel, in a voice of such alarm that Margaret laughed again. She knew well enough that Ethel did not wish her to marry Count Bartoloff, and it amused her to pretend that she misunderstood her friend's meaning.

“But you see, Ethel, it is really important for my family that I should marry young, so I ought not to throw away a good chance.”

“A *good* chance!” said Ethel; “that is the point. I can't bear the idea that you may be throwing *yourself* away. I wish your mother were here.”

“So do I,” said Margaret. “I often wonder what she would say, and Francie too. Mother is very sensible about everything, and Francie is wonderfully sharp. Father would have nothing to say to a foreigner, I know, but he is a regular

‘Britisher,’ and he would not really be sorry to get me off his hands.” There was a suspicion of tears in her voice, and Ethel clasped tighter the hand she held.

“Dear child,” she said, “there cannot really be such a desperate hurry. In any case you could make no definite promise until your parents know, and give their consent. I don’t think you are really in love yet, so you won’t mind my saying that all kinds of enquiries would have to be made before any engagement could possibly be allowed. And then, my dearest, don’t be angry if I ask you whether you are really sure you like him better than anyone else. You ought to be quite, quite certain of that, or you will be running the most fearful risks. I don’t say you must necessarily be desperately in love, though I always like it better when the woman is in love as well as the man ; but I am positive that you ought to be very sure that he *is* thoroughly in love with you, and that there is no one you care for as much. Don’t let there be any doubt about that.”

At that moment the dressing-bell rang ; Harry moved in his bed, and Margaret sprang up to see if he was awake. She did not answer Ethel’s last remark, but she threw her arms round her friend’s neck, murmuring, “You are very good to me ; I know I am horribly cross sometimes, but I have been so unhappy.”

CHAPTER XXI

THE CRIME

WHILE Lady Maude and her party were quietly dining at Bello Sguardo, Emmeline Browne was passing her evening in a state of feverish anxiety. It was but two days since she had promised Count Bartoloff to steal her husband's key, and this was the night on which the act must be done. Her lover had said that he must have the drawer opened on Monday, therefore she must not let herself fail. She had slept but little on Friday night, and not at all on Saturday, so that her nerves were at the highest tension ; every noise made her start, every glance which Sir William cast at her made her fancy that he had guessed her secret intentions. As a matter of fact, he had been unusually amiable during the last day or two. The prospect of war had exhilarated him, as it does every true soldier, and threw a glamour of sentimentality over his wife as the 'girl' he hoped to 'leave behind' him. She herself was timidly anxious to conciliate him. Her fretfulness and outbursts of jealousy had completely

ceased since her acquaintance with Count Bartoloff, though her alternating fits of excitement and depression had become more marked than before, and, indeed, had latterly increased to an almost alarming degree.

On this particular Sunday she had gone with her husband and child to the Garrison Church to hear Canon Curteis, whose extreme calmness and unworldliness had impressed her very much the evening before. The sermon—or, rather, the intense conviction in the preacher's tone and manner—had shaken her excitable soul to its foundations, and she had spent the afternoon in floods of tears, wondering whether she would not dismiss Count Bartoloff once for all and make full confession to her husband. She could not nerve herself up for the effort, however, and let Sir William dress and go out to dinner without speaking to him. She herself had a solitary meal, gave up all hopes of repentance, and fortified herself for her undertaking by reading an appropriate French novel. She had half hoped that he would have left his watch and chain behind him. Had she not sold herself to the devil? she thought recklessly, and did not the devil always make it easy for those who wish to gain the world and lose their souls? However, the key was not there. She must wait a few hours longer. She was so tired that every bone in her body ached, and her eyes were heavy and swollen,

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both with the tears she had shed and with sleepiness ; but though she went to bed about half-past ten, she could not sleep—indeed, she dared not. She lay, listening to every moan of the wind and to every creak of the furniture, and at last, when it was nearly midnight, she heard the hall-door open and shut. Then came another silence. She knew her husband had gone into his study ; there was always whisky and soda-water ready for him there, and sometimes he drank more than was good for him. Generally she hated the idea, but to-night she hoped he would, for then he would sleep quickly and heavily when he went to bed. She wondered what he was doing as the slow minutes passed. Was he writing, or reading, or drinking, or had he perhaps opened the drawer which contained his I.O.U.'s to Leo? Perhaps he was burning them. Why on earth had Leo ever given them to him, she wondered. His story struck her as being curious, though it did not yet occur to her to doubt it. What she thought was, that if Leo had not trusted her husband so foolishly, she need never have run such a frightful risk.

It was not till one o'clock that the steps for which she was listening began to come up the stairs. They were quite steady and regular ; Sir William was evidently perfectly sober. Lady Browne sighed, and waited. It was not till two had struck that, trembling violently, she got out

of bed, and with bare feet went to the door of the dressing-room and put her ear to the keyhole. The room seemed absolutely quiet ; she could hear nothing but the beating of her own heart, which was thumping and racing as if it must burst. There was just light enough from the street lamps to see what she was doing, and she durst not strike a match. She stood for perhaps five minutes that seemed like hours, before she very gently turned the handle and pushed the door ajar. The hinges squeaked—they were not often used, and they needed oiling. She paused again, thinking her husband might wake at the sound, but there was no movement, and at last she ventured in and crept noiselessly up to the dressing-table. Then came a fearful moment—the watch and chain were not there. She looked carefully all round, but they were nowhere to be seen ; he had evidently placed them under his pillow. She went back to her own room and sat down on the edge of her bed, shaking with fright and cold, and wondering what she should do next. She felt at first as if she could not by any possibility attempt anything further. She had counted so much on finding the key on the table that she had hardly considered what she should do if it were not there, and now the terrible decision was before her. Surely Leo would understand that she could not venture to draw the watch and chain from under her

husband's pillow! Supposing he were to wake and catch her in the act, what possible explanation could she give? No, she would tell Leo in the morning that she had promised the impossible, that she would face any public scandal rather than such a risk. She lay down once more, pulled the bed-clothes over her, and closed her eyes. But sleep would not come. She could think of nothing but Leo's face, Leo's disappointment, perhaps Leo's anger, when he heard she had given up the attempt. Perhaps he would give her up altogether. Perhaps he would marry Miss Somers. Whereas, if she gave him the key, he would surely be bound to her by an eternal debt of gratitude; he could not leave her then. If Sir William ever discovered anything, Leo must protect her. If he found her in the act of taking the watch away, she would say her own had stopped, and she wanted to know the time.

Still she lay motionless. The effort was tremendous, but perhaps the second attempt would not be quite so bad as the first; for one thing, the door had been left ajar this time and she could slip in noiselessly, so for Leo's sake she would try once more.

She got up again, therefore, and stood for a moment by her husband's bed, watching his regular breathing. Then she cautiously pushed her hand in under the pillow and felt for the watch. She

thought at first it was not there, and that she would have to go round to the other side of the bed, but as she was about to take her hand away, she felt something hard almost exactly under the spot where Sir William's head was lying. Now was the critical moment. She pulled it gently, and the chain, which was long and heavy, jingled a little; her husband moved slightly, and her heart was in her mouth. However, he did not open his eyes, and she carried the watch and chain carefully into her own room.

Now came another difficulty. Without a light she could not see clearly enough to take the key off; she was obliged, therefore, to strike a match, but she was less frightened now. Having got so far, she thought she should accomplish what she wished to do. She closed the door, lighted a candle, slipped the key off the ring, unlocked her own jewel-case, placing the key inside, and fastening the case again; then she considered where she should place the watch. She must, of course, put it back in her husband's room, but should she return it to its original position, or merely lay it on the table? The latter was the simpler plan and seemed safer. The only objection to it was, that he might remember having put it under his pillow, and notice with surprise that it was not there in the morning; then he might look at it more carefully than usual and see that the key

was missing. It was desirable that his attention should not be drawn to it in any special manner, as, if he discovered the absence of the key before she had had time to give it to the Count, he might insist on making such a search that she would not be able to hide it, and all her trouble and terror would have been in vain.

It was better, she thought, to make one more effort, so she blew out her candle and opened the door, determined to replace the watch where she had found it. The creaking of the hinges, however, seemed louder than before. Sir William turned uneasily in his sleep and breathed unevenly. She thought he was on the point of awaking, and in breathless haste laid the watch on the table and fled. As she closed the door behind her for the last time and leapt into bed, she felt ready to shriek with suppressed terror and excitement, and she expected every moment to hear noises in the next room and to see her husband coming in to ask what was the matter.

All was quiet, however. Three o'clock struck from the neighbouring tower, and the last shouts and songs in the town had died away. In a few hours Leo would be coming to see if she had kept her promise. Surely he would love her now, as he had never done before. He would never be able to guess what she had gone through all the long hours of that miserable night, but then men

never did understand what women suffer for their sakes. "As a man is able" was all she asked for. Sometimes she thought she had it, and then, again, a careless or indifferent glance or word threw her into despair. But now he must be grateful. Surely, surely no Margaret Somers could ever stand between them now! Great tears of anguished longing gathered and dropped slowly on to her pillow, and with a sob, she fell asleep at last—a sleep of exhaustion.

CHAPTER XXII

THE COUNT AND THE KEY

LADY BROWNE slept late on Monday morning, and breakfasted in bed, thereby avoiding any *tête-à-tête* with her husband, who left the house at his usual early hour to go down to his office. Evidently he had not missed the key, so far.

Emmeline was hardly dressed when she received a message to say that Miss Jarvis wished to speak to her, and being, as always, afraid of what that young lady might do and say, she admitted her at once.

"Oh! dear Lady Browne!" exclaimed Isabel, "how ill you are looking! Have you got an attack of fever too?"

"Oh no! only neuralgia; Malta always gives me headaches. How is your mother?"

"Better, thanks, but I have told her to stop in bed to-day. I won't keep you long." Emmeline's eyes were wandering to the door, where every moment she expected Count Bartoloff to appear. "I only came to ask you about this picnic to-day."

"What picnic? I haven't heard of any."

"Oh! are you not going? I made sure you were, as Count Bartoloff is giving it. They are going to ride and bicycle to Boschetto. I came to ask which you were going to do, and if I might start with you."

"I am not going—at least, I suppose not," said Lady Browne, hesitating. Perhaps Leo was going to tell her all about it when he came.

"Oh, do come!" said Isabel. "I am dying to go with you. It will be such fun."

"Are you invited?" asked Lady Browne. The question certainly sounded rude under the circumstances, but she knew Miss Jarvis too well not to be doubtful whether she was not squeezing herself in, unasked.

"Dear me!" said Isabel, with a hard little laugh, "do you think I should ask you to take me if I wasn't?"

"Well," said Lady Browne, "I will let you know by-and-by what I shall do. If I go, we might certainly start together, but my headache is so bad that very likely I shall stop at home to-day."

"We might go in costume," suggested Isabel. "I hear the Carnival is going to be duller than ever, and we might enliven it a little."

"Oh! there is no time to think of anything like that," cried Emmeline. She heard the front door open, and knew Count Bartoloff's step in the hall. *He* was almost certain to come straight to the

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little morning-room where she was sitting. If only Isabel would go first! But Isabel had heard the same sounds, and, with her insatiable curiosity, waited to see who the visitor was. Count Bartoloff, however, had chanced to ask if Lady Browne were alone, and hearing that Miss Jarvis was with her, had turned aside into Sir William's study. There was then a short silence between the two ladies, until Isabel, thinking she had nothing to gain by prolonging her visit, took her departure. Lady Browne heaved a sigh of relief, and as soon as the hall door was safely closed, and the man-servant departed, went into the study.

The Count was standing, staring absently out of the window into the street where a few masks were disporting themselves and trying to make fun—a fun that somehow seemed to fall flat. There were not many carriages yet, and there was no general merriment.

He turned round when Lady Browne entered, with a somewhat forced smile.

"Well, Emmeline?" he said.

"Oh, Leo!" she cried, in a very different tone, running to him with open arms like a child, and laying her head against his shoulder.

"Well! have you got it?" His voice sounded strained and eager, though he tried to keep it natural.

"Yes, it is in my jewel-case."

"In your jewel-case? But I want it here! Why did you not bring it with you?"

"I had no time. My maid was in the room with me when I had to go down to see Miss Jarvis. Oh, Leo! is it true you are giving a picnic to-day, and have not asked me?"

"My dear child, go and fetch the key first, and then we can talk about anything you like. Make haste! There is no safety while it is in your possession."

Emmeline left the room immediately and went upstairs. This reception had not been what she had expected, but then she had not yet actually given him the key. Her bedroom was being tidied by the Maltese housemaid. "Run away for a minute, Carlotta," she said; "I will ring when you can come back."

The woman left the room, but stood peeping through the key-hole, while Lady Browne unlocked her jewel-case, took out the fatal key, and replaced the box in its usual corner.

Count Bartoloff was seated at the writing-table when Emmeline returned, and seized eagerly the key which she held out to him. He turned it in the lock and it fitted; the drawer opened.

"Now, my love," he said, very calmly, "you must leave the room. It is much better that you should not see these papers. If your husband asks you any questions, you must be able to say, 'I

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know nothing.' Go into your room, I will follow you presently."

"And not a word of thanks! Oh, Leo!"

"My love, this is not the moment. When I have placed the papers in a secure place, then I will have time to thank you as you merit. But not now. Every instant is of importance. Go, my dear one, as you value your own safety, and mine."

Reluctantly, with drooping head, she went. Always the reward postponed! It seemed too hard. This morning, at least, she thought she would have had all the passionate caresses for which her soul was thirsting—and still they were put off to a more convenient season!

She went and lay down on the sofa in her morning-room, with the door open, so that Count Bartoloff could not leave the house unheard.

He was hard at work examining the papers which the drawer contained. Some he put back after glancing at them; some he transferred to his capacious pockets. The key he placed inside his purse, after re-locking the drawer.

The whole business had taken nearly an hour, and it was getting dangerously late, for Sir William sometimes came back to an early lunch, and he had much to do before he started off to fetch Margaret from Bello Sguardo. But he must give Emmeline a few minutes first. He buttoned his coat carefully up, replaced the chairs in the study exactly as he

had found them, and went quietly into the morning-room. Lady Browne had been crying again, and looked utterly worn out, but she revived when, having closed the door, he sat down beside her and took her cold hands in his, saying, "Now, *mignonne*, tell me all about it."

So she gave him the history of the terrible night, and he kissed her and praised her, saying she was a true heroine and had saved him from endless troubles. "I shall only keep the key till to-morrow," he said. "If he does not miss it before Tuesday evening, you can put it back on his chain then, and no one will ever guess what we have done."

"I don't think I shall ever have courage to go into his room again," she said.

"Well, then, it will not be necessary. You can say you found it on the study floor, and wondered if it belonged to him."

"So I could. And now, Leo, tell me about the picnic. Isabel Jarvis says you are giving one to-day."

"It was arranged in great haste," he answered. "There are a few people who have invited me to their houses, but not of your society, so I asked them to come out to Boschetto this afternoon, but there are only horses and bicycles—no carriages—so I thought it would be too tiring for you. Besides, it is not in such a manner that I care to meet

you. You go to the *bal masqué* this evening, do you not? Wear a red bow on your domino. I will wear one too, and people will think we belong to one party. I will wait for you at the entrance. The General comes, of course?"

"Oh yes! I could not come alone."

"Then that will be much better than meeting at the picnic. You have excited yourself too much over this matter; rest, and get calm. Remember, you must appear before your husband just as usual."

"I will try," said Emmeline, submissively.

The Count looked at his watch, jumped up hastily, kissed her once more, and was off. She lay on the sofa trying to feel satisfied with his behaviour towards her, while, in reality, the sense of disappointment was so keen that it produced physical pain. Her head, too, was throbbing unbearably, and her only chance of being fit to go to the Maltese masked ball was to go upstairs to her bedroom and keep perfectly quiet till it was time to dress. But first she must write a note to Isabel Jarvis.

"I don't believe Leo ever invited the creature at all," she said to herself, as she opened the ink-bottle. "By-the-bye, he never told me whom he had asked. I wonder if Miss Somers is going. Oh dear! how much longer can I endure to go on like this? If only I could run away with him, and

never see anyone again whom I had ever known before! But then I expect he would get tired of me. Besides, there is Blanche. Well! I suppose I must write this note."

"DEAR MISS JARVIS,—I am sorry to say I shall not be able to go out this afternoon. I have an engagement to-night, and my only chance of keeping it is to go to bed till the evening, as my neuralgia has come on worse than ever. I hope you will have a pleasant picnic. I daresay we shall meet to-morrow, and you can tell me all about it. (I do want to know who is to be there, and what Leo does.)—Yours sincerely,

"EMMELINE BROWNE."

She addressed the note in her rather scrawling, unformed handwriting, gave it to the servant, and went upstairs.

Count Bartoloff meanwhile, having let himself out of the house, had walked quickly down Strada Reale to the turning of the little street where he was lodging. The pavement was becoming crowded, and he instinctively kept his hand over the pocket containing the precious papers, though his coat was safely buttoned across. He was too pre-occupied to notice the Carnival masks or even the noises with which their wearers tried to make themselves ridiculous, for he had some important matters to think over, and the time was short. He locked himself into his bare room, took the papers

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out, and glanced over them. His first idea had been to copy them immediately, but he saw that this was impossible before the picnic, so he locked them, together with Sir William's key, into an iron safe that stood in the corner, having decided that he would not begin the transcription of them until after his return from the ball. It was important that he should meet Lady Browne there, in case Sir William should have meanwhile discovered the theft ; he proposed to have a couple of hours' sleep before he went to the ball, and to sit up all night writing, if necessary, so as to complete his task before daylight on Tuesday. A registered packet by the first post, and his anxieties would be practically over.

It would be, however, desirable for him to leave Malta as soon as possible, and his relations with Lady Browne, though through them he had accomplished the object of his stay in Valetta, were embarrassing. He would not have found them so much so, had it not been for Margaret Somers, for whom he had conceived as genuine an admiration as was possible for a man of his stamp. He really intended to make her a proposal of marriage that afternoon, and in the event of her answer being at all favourable, he was most anxious that Lady Browne should not stand in his way. If she consented to stay behind with her husband, all might yet be well, though her presence in Valetta

would be a constant danger, for she might at any time tell Margaret quite enough to frighten the girl out of an engagement.

On the other hand, he was not without some feelings of pity for Emmeline. If she had not attracted him at the outset, he would never have begun the dangerous game which he had been playing, and if she wished to come away with him, he could not refuse to take her. He had, however, no intention of marrying her, even if Sir William should divorce her. He intended to tell Margaret that he was saving her from a brutal husband, and that she was merely leaving Malta under his protection, and if Margaret were as much in love with him as he hoped, it was possible that she might believe the story. At any rate, if for a day, or even an hour, he could know that Margaret loved him, he felt the reward would be worth the effort, even though the result might be misery to her and disgrace to him.

Half-an-hour was all he required to pack his goods and chattels, which were not numerous, and it was possible to leave Malta by some route or other every day, except in very stormy weather. It was true that Sir William owed him some money, though not any very large sums, but he would not stay to recover his debts. After all, he had stolen something which most men value more than a hundred or two odd pounds.

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On the whole, then, the conclusion he came to was this—to place his future in Margaret's hands, telling her that his past had not been immaculate, but that he intended to be a model husband to a woman whom he could respect as well as love; then if she accepted him, he would leave Malta at once, before Arthur Gordon returned or Sir William had discovered his loss, pay a short visit to Petersburg, and then go over to England, where he would meet Margaret on her return, and make a formal request for her hand from her father.

Having settled his plan of action, the Count took up a pair of dumb-bells and practised vigorously for a quarter of an hour; then he dressed himself in faultless riding attire, and strolled down to the Club for a light luncheon before starting for Bello Sguardo.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PICNIC

LITTLE Harry had been taken back to his parents that morning by Margaret, and had been greatly excited at the masks and bizarre costumes which were to be seen parading the streets. He begged so hard for a mask too, that she stopped on their way at a toy-shop and bought him one, with which he was highly delighted. His mother was quite properly terrified at the fearful sight he presented, and this was the culminating joy of a delightful twenty-four hours, during which he had had 'Summie' at his beck and call. Mrs Thompson was brimming over with the news that Major Martin and Arthur Gordon were expected to return on the following day. "My husband is so delighted," she said. "He was really anxious about them, but it seems that everything has gone off well, and it ought to tell very much in their favour as regards promotion, for I fancy it was by no means an easy business."

"I had no idea they were likely to be back so

soon," said Margaret ; she felt the colour rush all over her face, and buried it in Harry's hair.

Mrs Thompson begged her to stay to lunch, but she said she had kept her carrozze waiting and must return to Bello Sguardo at once, as she was going out for a ride.

"Oh ! are you going to Count Bartoloff's picnic ? Who is going to take you ? I hear there are such a curious set of people going."

"Lady Maude gave me leave to go, so I suppose it is all right," said Margaret, holding her head rather high.

"Oh, no doubt !" responded Mrs Thompson, though her tone belied her words. "Miss Jarvis came in a minute ago to ask me if I would escort her, but I am glad to say I am not invited."

"Well, if I don't like it, I can go home," said Margaret ; "one is very independent on horseback."

"I don't think you ought to ride alone here," said Mrs Thompson. "However, I won't keep you if you really want to be off."

"Good-bye," said Margaret. "Good-bye, Harry, darling. I have so enjoyed having him, Mrs Thompson, and he has been quite angelically good."

"I am very glad," said his mother, smiling ; "there is often quite another story in the nursery."

Margaret's favourite carrozze took her back at a

great pace to Bello Sguardo, but she had time to think over the rather startling piece of news she had just heard. The picnic seemed suddenly to lose a great deal of its importance, for she had realised like a flash of lightning that it was quite impossible for her to become engaged to Count Bartoloff until she had, at any rate, seen Arthur Gordon once more. She had tried so hard to forget the sailor, and she was now aware that the very effort, of which she had been conscious, only proved how deep was the impression which he had made on her. She had endeavoured, ever since his departure, to make herself believe that everything was for ever over between them, and now, the moment she heard that he was coming back, hope refused to be quenched. Perhaps, after all, he had 'cared'—perhaps——

The carrozze stopped at the door of Bello Sguardo; she paid the driver, with a smile, and ran singing up the stairs to dress before lunch, and when she appeared in the dining-room, there was something in her face which made Ethel look earnestly at her—something which told of happy expectation; so that Ethel, knowing nothing of what had passed, sighed, as she thought that a man like Count Bartoloff had the power to bring such a look into her friend's face.

Margaret's pony, and the Count on his steed, arrived at almost the same moment. He was

flattered to find the girl waiting, and at being allowed to mount her. Her nervousness had returned a little, but the feeling of being on horseback gave her confidence, and she waved back a merry farewell to Ethel, who was watching the start.

As they walked their little horses down the hill, there was a short silence. He was admiring her straight, slender figure and easy seat, and she was wondering whether he meant to say anything specially to her during the few minutes that they would be alone together, before they reached Porta Sant' Anna and met the rest of the party. However, he seemed in no particular hurry, for he made a few casual remarks first, asking her how and when she first learnt to ride, and what parts of the island she had already visited.

Then, in a more tender tone, he thanked her for coming that day, and for trusting to his escort as far as Boschetto.

She was a little startled to see that no horses were waiting at the gate. "Are we early?" she asked, "or have they gone on? Who are coming?"

"They are mostly riding bicycles," he said; "they have not such good taste as you and I. They prefer a machine to a horse."

"But this is not fair, Count Bartoloff," said Margaret, rather stiffly. "I understood we were

to meet the rest of your party here. I do not think Lady Maude would like me to ride on alone with you ; I had better turn back."

He thought for a moment that his cause was lost, and that she would really turn her pony's head homewards ; but eager excuses and apologies made her pause. She knew that girls often did, at Malta, go for *tête-à-tête* rides and drives with men, without any special meaning being attached to it, and she had a strong dislike to making herself ridiculous by a fuss about nothing ; so, though annoyed, she decided to go on to Boschetto, hoping that they would, before arriving there, catch up those who had started earlier. The Count had therefore gained his point, but he felt that he had gone down a little in Margaret's estimation, and sighed at the terribly moral standpoint from which even the most charming English girls viewed everything. However, he was so much in earnest this time, that she could not help being impressed. Though a proposal on horseback is not exactly an ideal situation, yet it really was as favourable a one as Count Bartoloff could have chosen. He rode very well, and the fact that he could not actually touch her, and that there were none of the fictitious accessories of a ball-room round them, but only the quaint wide landscape, with the Citta Vecchia hills behind, and the soft February sky above, told in *his* favour with a girl such as Margaret.

He was more eloquent, though he was not talking in his native tongue, than an Englishman would have been under such circumstances, but there was nothing strained or unreal in the eager torrent of words, and the tears gathered in her eyes as she listened. The sense of exultation with which she had looked forward to this moment gave place to a feeling of humiliation and shame. Who was she, to inspire such admiration, such devotion, such love? What had she done, too, to make him think she could return it?—for she saw that he was hopeful, almost confident. But perhaps his appeal to her generosity touched her most. He told her he had had a past, of much of which he was ashamed, but that his enemies would blacken it unduly. He begged her not to listen to stories she might hear, but to trust to him, and he swore she would never repent it.

“We men, we do not lead pure, good lives like you. We are tossed about the world, and we get soiled and stained, but if any of us marries a pure, good woman, he is saved. You can lift me above my past, and you only. If you do not give me a hand, I shall sink, but you will not let me do that, will you? I think you have enough interest in me to wish to save me.”

Margaret did not know what to reply ; she could not say she loved him, for she was becoming more and more convinced every moment that what she

felt for him might be sympathy, pity, even admiration, but was certainly not love. Though it was weeks since she had seen Arthur Gordon, and though meanwhile she had been living constantly in Count Bartoloff's society and had been greatly flattered by his preference, yet she was certain that if she loved either of the two, it was not the Count. But then she was now sure, on the other hand, that the Count loved her, whereas she was not at all so sure of Arthur Gordon, and she felt by no means guiltless of having encouraged the former beyond what her own feelings justified. She was therefore embarrassed, and uncertain what to say in answer to the Count's final appeal. He, on his part, was getting more anxious. She had not responded so fully and freely as he had expected ; her tears were certainly signs of emotion, but she looked unhappy instead of joyful, and it was quite evident that she was not at all prepared to jump into his arms. The more uncertain he became of his prize, the more eagerly he coveted it, but he reflected Margaret's reserve had frequently baffled him before, and that he might yet overcome this final timidity, or whatever it was, which still held her back.

They had seen nothing of the other riders, and were now climbing the narrow track that led to Boschetto. The bank of the stream, with the green furrows and the hedges of prickly pear, had been *left behind*, and the ponies picked their way over

the rough stones. The breeze blew freshly from the hills and the sound of the Citta Vecchia bells came down on it. But both of the riders were too preoccupied to notice these things. Margaret felt that she must at least say something ; for Count Bartoloff was silent at last, and she knew his eyes were fixed upon her, waiting. She raised her own with an effort and met them, but her glance dropped directly before the concentrated passion in his. For the first time, she felt a little frightened, and wished she were not alone with him, and she was angry that her voice trembled as she spoke.

"I am afraid I cannot give you the answer you want," she said. "I am very, very sorry if I have given you reason to think I could."

"I had thought," said Count Bartoloff, his voice vibrating with the effort he was making to keep calm, "I had thought you looked upon me with some favour ; but I do not wish to hurry you, I only ask to be allowed to hope. I could not delay speaking to you, for I have to leave Malta very soon, perhaps to-morrow, and I must have some hope of seeing you again. If you will give me leave I will come to England when you return, and I will pay my respects to your father and mother. Will you at least give me permission to do this ?"

"Oh !" cried Margaret, distressed. "I do not know. I cannot tell. I do not think it would be any good."

"But think, Miss Somers!" he exclaimed, almost peremptorily; "you have let me dance with you, ride with you, see you constantly, talk to you every day, and now you seem to think you can dismiss me like a perfect stranger. It cannot be! It is impossible that I can bear it. I have some right to be thought of. You have known for long that there is no one whom I worship but you,—you cannot be so cruel, so heartless, as to send me away without a word of kindness."

"But if I cannot—cannot return your feelings," said Margaret, again, "what am I to do? It is not my fault. I can't tell you I do, when I don't. I am very sorry indeed to distress you, and I beg your pardon very humbly if I have done you any wrong."

"Ah no!" he cried, "that I cannot permit. You must not ask pardon of me. You are so much above me that I was presumptuous to think you could love such a one as I am. But I do not take this as your final answer; I will see you at the Palace Ball to-morrow, see you once more, and you may tell me then if I may come again in England."

His last sentence was hurried, and spoken in his usual voice, though rather low, for they had now reached the grove of oranges from which Boschetto takes its name.

Of the dozen or so of both sexes who were

assembled there, there were two or three in riding habits and the rest had their bicycles collected near them, but there were hardly any whom Margaret knew, and of these few Isabel Jarvis was one.

The girl, riding up in this way alone with Count Bartoloff, the giver of the picnic, felt herself unpleasantly conspicuous, and her indignation rose again at the trick which had been played her ; for in spite of the Count's excuses she could not forgive him for placing her in such an uncomfortable position. Miss Jarvis was amused to find Margaret actually seeking her society, and delighted at the opportunity of sounding her on the relations existing between her and the Count.

An elaborate tea had been brought out in a carrozze and prepared on the grass, and the party sat round it on rugs and cushions, and were rather noisily merry. Most of them had jokes among themselves which Margaret did not understand, but she and Isabel sat a little apart from the rest, and the Count, though attentive and respectful, left them alone and amused his other guests.

"Poor Lady Browne!" said Isabel, "she has such a fearful headache that she could not come to-day. It was an awful disappointment to her, for she worships the ground our host treads on, don't you think so?"

"I hardly know Lady Browne," said Margaret, coldly.

"I like her, poor little woman, but she will make Valetta too hot to hold her, if she doesn't take care. It is odd that men may do anything they like, whereas women—but I forgot. I suppose I mustn't talk about the Count to you like that."

"I wish you would not talk like that at all," said Margaret, boldly. "I don't think it is either right or kind."

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I did not know how far it had gone. Am I to congratulate you?"

"What on earth do you mean?" cried Margaret, growing hot and then cold.

"Naturally, we all expect to hear an interesting announcement. But perhaps I am premature. I have no wish to spoil sport."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Do you really want me to ask you point blank? Are you engaged to be married to Count Bartoloff?"

"No, certainly not."

"Oh!" said Isabel, in a significant voice. Then she added, "All Malta thought you were, or were on the point of being, but if I may say so, I think you are wise."

"Really. I never asked your advice," said Margaret, exasperated beyond endurance.

"No, you did not; but you are younger than me, and you are either very innocent or very callous, if you don't know or don't care for the

things that will be said about you when you go riding alone about the country with a man like the Count, and go to parties given by him without a chaperon."

"He told me there would be a riding party and chaperons," said Margaret, almost choking with rage and shame. "I thought it was arranged that we should all meet at Porta Sant' Anna."

"Oh! I daresay! He wanted to compromise you, I suppose. Well, I shall wait with interest to see what the *dénouement* will be."

How Margaret got through the rest of the afternoon she hardly knew. Fortunately for her, the days were still short, and after an early tea the party started homewards almost immediately. Count Bartoloff did not attempt to ride back with her, and she joined a very silent and staid old gentleman, who was so much occupied with two very frisky daughters, whom he was chaperoning, that he paid little attention to her, and she hardly spoke until near Porta Sant' Anna, when, with feelings of great relief, she suddenly saw Dr Masters and Canon Curteis walking towards her. She reined up at once, saying good-night to her companions, and crossing the road joined Dr Masters, who told her that Ethel had fancied that the masks and noises in the roads might frighten her horse, and that he and Canon Curteis had therefore walked out to meet her, and Margaret felt safe once more.

in their companionship. She was so tired when she got home that she sent word to Lady Maude that she had a headache, and went straight to bed. Ethel came to see her, but soon perceived that something had gone wrong about which she was not yet inclined to talk, and left her in peace, without trying to force her confidence.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SECRET PAPERS

COUNT BARTOLOFF rode home from the picnic in a somewhat dejected frame of mind. He perceived that his supreme effort had failed, though he did not know how seriously angry Margaret was. However, he did not give up all hope, and he intended to make one more attempt at the Palace Ball the following day. Meanwhile, he adhered to his programme. He was able, like many strong men, to sleep whenever he wished, and he lay down to refresh himself by two or three hours' rest before dining and putting on his domino for the masked ball. Lady Browne had sent him a little red bow exactly like her own, and this he fastened on at the neck, and then walked the short distance from the club to the hall, where the chief people in the Maltese Society of Valetta were giving the entertainment. He had not waited long before the two persons whom he was expecting arrived. Sir William Browne was in mufti, but Emmeline had on her domino with the red bow, and the Count

and she went into the ball-room together, the General stopping near the entrance to watch the arrivals.

It was still rather early, but dancing had begun, and there was plenty of room to walk about and look on. So the Count took his partner to promenade round the dancers. He soon perceived that Lady Browne was in low spirits, and when they were in a somewhat quiet place, she said to him at once, "I can't enjoy this to-night. I am much too anxious. He has found out that his key is missing."

"Sapristi!" said the Count; "that is bad. How did it happen?"

"He came in late, just in time to dress for dinner. We were to dine quite alone. He went at once into his study; I was coming downstairs just at the time, and as the door was open, I heard him utter a sharp exclamation. He had wanted to open his drawer, and found the key was gone from his watch-chain. He came into the drawing-room and asked me if I had seen one lying about anywhere. 'There are all sorts of important papers in the drawer,' he said; 'it will be most inconvenient if I cannot find the key—I cannot imagine how it can have slipped off, for the ring is not broken.' Of course, I said I had not seen it, and I asked if he never took it off himself. He might have done so, I said, and left it in the drawer, and then it might

have fallen on to the floor and got brushed away by the servants."

The Count, who was listening with great gravity, nodded approvingly.

"You can imagine what a fright I was in," she went on. "I was so afraid I might say something which would betray us. And he was fearfully upset—I have never seen him so annoyed about anything before—he really got quite pale, and it seemed as if the loss of the key frightened him. I have often seen him angry, but never like that."

"Ah!" said Count Bartoloff. "I daresay. Well?"

"Well, what shall we do now? If you could give me back the key to-night, I could put it in his dressing-room or study, and then he would see it was all right."

"I might give you back the key, but I cannot give you the papers yet, and if he opened the drawer and found the papers were missing there would be worse trouble than ever."

"Why? I thought you said they were only I.O.U.'s."

"So I did. Well, he does not wish to lose the I.O.U.'s."

"I can't understand why he should make such a fearful fuss about it."

"My dear child, you cannot understand these matters. Let me think! If you can keep your

husband quiet till nine o'clock to-morrow morning, I will return the key and the papers by any trusty messenger you may send."

"There is no chance of that. He has already sent a message to a carpenter to come at daylight to-morrow and break the drawer open."

"Send another message to the carpenter to say he must not come. Then get the General to go down to his work as usual, telling him the carpenter cannot come till the middle of the day. As soon as he has left the house, my parcel will arrive, and you can then open the drawer and replace the papers, and when Sir William returns he will find the key on the table, and you will say it was discovered on the floor—anywhere, so long as you always say the same thing."

"I will try," said Emmeline, sighing; "but I don't know whom I can send to-night to the carpenter. The only person I can trust is Carlotta, who lends me her faldetta whenever I want it, and she does not sleep in the house. Probably the carpenter will arrive to-morrow morning before she does."

"Can't you leave a message with your fatiman to send the carpenter back when he comes, saying there was a mistake?"

"Yes, I might do that, if I can speak to him to-night when my husband isn't there. But I firmly believe he will get that drawer opened before he

leaves the house to-morrow. He was very much inclined not to come here this evening, but he did not think he would get a workman to come so late, and I fancy he had some rendezvous or other to keep. For my part, I certainly should not have come if it had not been that you had arranged to meet me, for I am much too anxious to be able to enjoy myself, and the music and lights make my headache worse."

"Let me take you home. I will come back and tell Sir William that you were unwell and did not wish to stay longer. Then you will be able to speak to your fatica-man."

"That is true. Well, I will go. The carriage is waiting. Oh, Leo! I wish you knew all that I am going through for your sake."

"My dear, you do it for me, I know, but remember you wished to avoid any public scandal as regards Sir William's debts, and I am doing my best to protect you."

She sighed again. The explanation was beginning to lose some of its probability in her eyes, but she said nothing further, and let him lead her away and put her into her carriage. As soon as he had seen her off, he came back to the ball-room, took off his domino, and plunged into the midst of the throng. Sir William seemed to be enjoying himself thoroughly, and to be without a care. A good many masks had been removed and

the fun was becoming fast and furious, when in a press near the door, the Count spoke to the General, who was standing close by.

"I have just put Lady Browne into her carriage," he said, "she was feeling unwell, and desired me to tell you she had not seen you and so sent a message by me."

"You are very good," said Sir William. Perhaps it was the Count's guilty conscience which made him fancy that the tone was less cordial than usual.

"I am sorry to hear of the loss you have had," went on Count Bartoloff. "It is annoying to lose anything, but especially a key."

"Yes, it is a confounded nuisance," replied the General. "However, I shall have the lock forced to-morrow morning."

"I would advise you not to be in too great a hurry," said the Count, "probably you will find the key somewhere to-morrow, and then if you have forced the drawer open you will have spoiled the lock for nothing."

The General made no reply, but went off with a lady wearing a domino, and the Count lost him in the crowd.

Half-an-hour later, Count Bartoloff, in dressing-gown and slippers, with a strong cigar between his lips, and a cup of coffee at his elbow, sat at his table, copying rapidly the papers that lay

before him. Among them were sketches of fortifications, plans, and maps, of which he took careful tracings, and the work lasted without pause for some hours, till the grey morning light began to creep through the jalousies—and the gas jets looked first yellow and then pale as the daylight grew. The task was not finished yet, but he got up from his chair, threw open the window and leant out over the still silent street. Then he made himself some fresh coffee and set to work again. In another hour the last line was copied—and he placed the originals, together with the key, in a large undirected envelope, while he folded the copies into another and stronger envelope and addressed it to an official of the Russian Foreign Office, with the following note, written in French, enclosed.

“MY DEAR IVAN PETROVITCH,—I have at length finished the task we discussed last November. It has taken longer than I expected, and would not be accomplished now, save for the aid of a lady who looks upon me with some kindness. Cultivate the fair sex, my friend ; it is difficult to arrive without them. I hope your chief will be satisfied.

“You have left me without news so long, that I know not what the prospects really are, but from increasing reserve in high quarters here, I fancy they are serious. However that may be, I trust I shall be thought to have earned my pardon for any

youthful indiscretions. I leave here to-morrow, probably, and shall stay in Paris till I hear from you. Write to me soon, to the Grand Hotel."

He signed the letter and sealed the envelope carefully ; then he dressed and walked down to the Post Office and registered the packet, after which he returned to his lodgings and found Carlotta was waiting for him. He gave her the unaddressed envelope, slipping a sovereign into her hand, and saying as he did so that she was to hasten back with the packet, and on no account to deliver it up except into her mistress's own hands. He then strolled down to the Club and made a leisurely breakfast, which he felt he fully deserved after his hard night's work.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RIFLED DRAWER

LADY BROWNE had, as usual, found her "faticaman," Michael, waiting in the hall when she returned from the Ball, and had told him that when the carpenter arrived the following morning he was to be sent away again. She repeated this several times, so as to be quite sure that the lad understood it, and then went to bed, took a slight opiate for her neuralgia, and fell asleep. The General returned some hours later and examined the closed drawer once more. He and the Admiral had been discussing some points of strategy, and he wished to go carefully over the secret instructions which had lately been sent out by the Central Defence Committee. This, with other important and confidential papers, bearing on the distribution of ships and troops in certain contingencies, and including the last list of secret signals and the newest cipher for telegrams, were all locked up in the drawer. The idea that the key might have been stolen had indeed flashed across his mind ; he had

rejected it as impossible, seeing that it was always on his watch-chain, and that his watch was always either in his pocket or under his pillow ; but he was inevitably anxious to see for himself that the contents of the drawer had not been tampered with. However, there was nothing to be done until the carpenter arrived. So he went upstairs and to bed. His sleep was light and disturbed, and as soon as there was any movement in the house he got up and enquired if the workman had come. The cook and the "fatica-man" had gone to the market, and Carlotta, who was dusting the study, said Michael had told her the carpenter was not to be admitted.

"Confound the fool !" said Sir William, angrily, "of course he is to be admitted. You are to fetch him in here the moment he comes."

"Michael said my lady said no," persisted Carlotta.

"Never mind what Michael said, or what my lady said," retorted the General. "I am master here, and I want the man."

"I think my lady knows something about the key," said Carlotta, coming close up to him, and speaking very low.

"How dare you say such a thing? What on earth do you mean?"

"You give me more wages, I tell you," said Carlotta, suggestively.

Sir William paused before replying. The idea was too preposterous to be possible, and he thought this was probably only an attempt at blackmailing, but on the other hand he had no trust whatever in his wife and believed she was capable of anything if she had sufficient motive. He did not see what motive she could have had for stealing his key, nor indeed how she could have accomplished it, but still it would be foolish not to follow up any possible clue.

He therefore replied after a moment's thought, "I will give you half-a-sovereign now, and another when the key is found—but if you are telling me a lie, you will leave this house to-day."

"I not tell lie. I speak truth," said Carlotta, and she then related how Lady Browne had, on the previous day, come up to her bed-room, taken a key out of her jewel-box, and left the room with the key in her hand.

Sir William laughed incredulously. "How do you know it was my key?" he said, "and do you suppose she would have let you see her with it if it had been?"

Carlotta replied that Lady Browne had turned her out of the room, but that she saw through the key-hole, and that she was certain it was the missing key, she had noticed that it was small, and gold-coloured; she felt sure it would fit the lock.

The evidence seemed absurdly inadequate for such an accusation, but the fact that Emmeline had apparently tried to prevent the carpenter from opening the drawer lent the story some additional plausibility, and Carlotta was sharp enough to see this, and to impress it upon the General. He frowned but was silent, and she thought he had forgotten her promised reward.

"My story true. You give me half-sovereign," she said, edging up to him.

"There you are, and damn you," said Sir William, furiously, throwing her the money.

She did not appear at all perturbed, but put the coin in her pocket with a grin, and went away.

Carlotta had her own code of honour. She had several times acted as go-between with Lady Browne and the Count, and had received many presents from the latter. She was in fact rather interested in the intrigue, and nothing would have induced her to betray Count Bartoloff. She had lent her faldetta more than once to Lady Browne, but she found her mistress capricious and exacting, and considered that she showed great meanness in not rewarding her more largely for her services. She guessed, as soon as Sir William missed the key, that it was the same key which she had seen in his wife's possession, and she was not sorry to have an opportunity of doing her an ill turn ; but she had not in any way connected the theft with Count Bartoloff.

As she left the study the carpenter arrived, and she took him at once to Sir William; a minute afterwards she heard Lady Browne's voice calling her.

She went upstairs and found her mistress sitting up in bed. "Carlotta," she said, "run round to Count Bartoloff's and ask him for a packet for me; don't go away from his rooms till you have seen him and got the packet, but the moment you have, come back here as fast as you can and bring it straight to me. Mind that nobody else sees it."

Carlotta nodded, and went off, and Emmeline got up and began to dress; she felt certain that the carpenter would be prevented from entering the house, and expected soon to hear her husband fuming at the delay; it would be then her task to try and quiet him and persuade him to go to his office as usual. If she succeeded, there would be nothing more to fear.

But the house seemed very quiet. The General did not appear, nor did Carlotta return. Emmeline rang for her maid, and at last went down into the breakfast-room, where the table was laid, and began to read her letters. Presently her little girl came in, to say good-morning before beginning her lessons.

"Will you take me out for a walk this morning?" she asked, coaxingly.

"I will see, darling," said her mother; "I am

rather tired to-day, because I had a bad headache yesterday, and I am going to the Palace Ball to-night, so I don't expect I shall have a walk ; but you may have a carrozze drive after lunch and see all the funny people, and then you can help me dress for the Ball. I've got such a pretty gown, you can't think."

"Oh, thank you, mummie," said the child ; she ran to the door, and then came back and said, "What's father doing in the study?"

"Is he in the study? I did not know."

"Yes, and there's a man with him with a big basket and a hammer and all sorts of things. What's he doing?"

Lady Browne jumped up as if she had been shot. "Then the carpenter *has* come," she said ; "what shall I do?"

Blanche stood looking at her in surprise.

"What's the matter, mummie?" she asked.

"Oh, do go away, and don't ask any more questions," replied her mother, irritably ; "go and see if you can find Carlotta, and tell her to come here at once."

Blanche danced away, banging the door after her, and Emmeline stood by the fireplace, twisting her hands, and wishing she could ask someone for advice. "If only Leo were here ! I think I must go and see if they are really forcing the drawer. If they are, perhaps I had better burn the papers

as soon as Carlotta comes back. I might give William back the key, and tell him I had found it. Perhaps I might give him the papers, too, Leo did not seem to mind his having them back. I wish I had never promised to get Leo the key. I don't believe they were really all about their gambling debts, and even if they were, I had better have let things take their natural course, rather than go through all this."

As she stood in doubt, the door opened, and Carlotta, still in her faldetta, came in. She handed Lady Browne the packet, explaining that the cause of her delay had been the Count's absence from his lodgings. "Did he send me any message?" asked Emmeline. Carlotta shook her head. "Well, thank you, Carlotta," said her mistress, "go and take off your faldetta, and be sure you don't tell a soul where you have been."

As soon as the servant had left, she examined the envelope carefully, to see if there were any traces on it that might show where it came from. There were none that she could see, but it seemed wiser to destroy it, so she opened it, and put it in the fire, slipping its contents into an empty drawer in the sideboard. They might stay there, she thought, till she had found out what was happening in the study. Her heart beat violently as she opened the door of the little room.

The carpenter had already forced the lock of

the drawer which was now lying on the writing-table. Sir William was bending over it, and his face had a curious, set expression that his wife had never seen before.

"That will do," he said to the man, who was collecting his tools; "if I want you again I will send for you."

The carpenter shouldered his basket and left the room. Lady Browne felt half inclined to follow him, for her husband's expression terrified her, but as she made a move towards the door, he looked up, and said very calmly, "Wait here a moment."

She obeyed, but did not venture to speak. His face grew whiter and whiter, as he examined the papers that were left in the drawer, and when he spoke again, his voice shook.

"Emmeline!" he said, "do you know anything about this key?"

"How do you mean? Of course I know you have lost it, but I can't imagine why you are making such a fuss about it." Her voice trembled too, though she tried to seem careless.

"Have you any idea what I keep in this drawer?"

"No. How should I? You have never told me."

"Somebody must know, somebody who has stolen my key."

"Stolen your key! Who can have stolen it? You must have dropped it somewhere."

"Don't contradict me," he cried, with rising passion. "Someone *has* stolen it, in order to steal some papers out of the drawer."

"Oh dear! Are there papers missing? Do they matter much?"

"They are papers on which the safety of England might depend, if they fell into the hands of anyone who knew how to make use of them. I would rather die than lose them. If they are really gone, my whole career is ruined. I may as well cut my throat at once."

Lady Browne turned very white. This solution of the enigma was utterly unexpected, and confused her so much that she knew not what to reply. Her one idea was, to save Count Bartoloff at all costs; in order to do so, she must absolutely deny any knowledge of the key or the papers. She stood, staring helplessly at the drawer, her husband's eyes fixed on her, and reading in her face the confession of guilt. At that moment the General's English soldier servant entered the room.

"If you please, sir," he said, "is this the key you was lookin' for? I found it this minute in the sideboard when I was goin' to put in the clean napkins. There was these papers there too."

"Good gracious," exclaimed the General, "how the deuce can they have got there!"

"I am sure I don't know, sir," said the man. "They wasn't there last night, for I cleared the

drawer out myself after dinner. Mr Anderson was there too, and he seed me."

"Tell Anderson to come and speak to me," said Sir William.

The Scotch butler, who had been with the General for many years, was the personification of severe propriety. He corroborated the valet's story. The drawer in the sideboard had been emptied the previous evening, and five minutes ago he had been called by Norris to look at the key and the papers, and had directed him, as he had found them, to take them at once to his master. Anderson gave Norris in every respect a good character; he believed it quite impossible that anyone could have tampered with him in such a way as to induce him to steal the key and the papers.

"Begging your pardon, Sir William," said the butler, "the lad ain't clever enough to do such a thing, nor I don't know no one in the house that is."

"Well," said Sir William, "it is the most extraordinary thing; I shall have to put it in the hands of the police. See that no one leaves the house, Anderson, or comes into this room."

"Yes, Sir William," said the butler and retired.

"Don't you think you probably did it yourself one day, when—when you had been drinking rather?" suggested Lady Browne.

She thought the invention was a brilliant one,

and might quiet her husband, but its only effect was to make him exceedingly angry, and for the first time he actually swore at her.

"Don't speak to me like that," she said, beginning to cry. "Surely there is no need to make any more fuss, now the wretched things have been found."

"There is every need to make a fuss, until I find out who has had them since they left my keeping. Are you a fool? Don't you understand they are Government secrets placed in my charge, and that if I do not keep them safe, I am liable to be court-martialed, degraded, turned out of the Service—shot, in time of war?"

The idea had struck him that if he frightened her sufficiently, she might of her own accord confess what she had done, if she had really taken the key. Supposing she alone had seen the papers, no great harm would have been done, as they would be practically incomprehensible to her, and in that case he need say nothing about the matter to his superiors. On the other hand, if the whole thing remained a mystery, he was bound to inform the Governor at once, in order that immediate precautions might minimise the danger as much as possible. The situation was a terrible one. His whole career, his honour, if not his life, was at stake, and he suspected the trembling woman whom he called his wife to be the author of the crime.

She did not speak ; she was petrified with terror, but she had no idea of making a confession, being determined to screen Count Bartoloff, and she did not think even now that her husband suspected her.

He waited a little longer, and then all the torrent of his rage burst forth ; he accused her of stealing the key for some purpose of her own ; he threatened her with all the penalties of the law ; he told her she was an abandoned woman, who should no longer remain mistress of his house, he almost choked with passion, foaming at the mouth, while Emmeline crouched on the sofa and expected every moment that he would strike her.

He came very close to her once, and shook his fist in her face. "I have never laid hands on a woman yet," he cried, "but by God, if I find you took the key I won't leave a bone whole in your body !"

Then he took up the papers and the key and flung out of the house.

Emmeline fled, crying, upstairs.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PENITENT

WHILE Count Bartoloff was enjoying an excellent breakfast at the Club, a letter was brought to him which had just been delivered by the postman. It was not in a handwriting that he knew, but it bore the Bello Sguardo address on the envelope. He opened it, and this is what he read:

“DEAR COUNT BARTOLOFF,—I hope you will not speak to me again to-morrow night, or at any other time, on the subject you were talking of to-day. It is quite impossible for me to give you the answer you wish, so it will be useless to refer to it again. I can only repeat I am very sorry indeed if I am causing you pain, or if I have given you any reason to expect a different result. Please take this as absolutely final.—Yours very truly,

“MARGARET SOMERS.”

“*Sacrebleu ! Voilà cette maudite pudeur de jeune fille !*” exclaimed the Count, under his breath. The blow came quite unexpectedly, and somewhat

staggered him for the moment. He knew Margaret well enough to be aware that she had written the note in no spirit of coquetry, and he wondered what it was which had suddenly made her so much more decided in her refusal than she had been during her ride. Well, it mattered the less that he was about to leave Malta; he could still, with or without Margaret's permission, visit England later in the spring, and it was possible she might then reconsider her decision.

His appetite, however, seemed to have left him; he glanced at the telegrams, but there was nothing fresh since the previous evening; then he thought he would return to his lodging, see if there were any further message from Lady Browne, and afterwards go down to the different shipping offices and learn what vessels were leaving Valetta during the next day or two.

When he reached his rooms, he found a little dark figure crouching in the farthest corner. It was Emmeline herself. She sprang forward with a cry, "Oh, Leo!" and burst into convulsive sobs and tears.

"Hush! hush!" he said, "not so loud, you may be heard. Did you see anyone as you came up the stairs?"

She shook her head, but it was some minutes before she could control herself sufficiently to speak. Then she said, "The door was open, and

there was no one about, but if I had been seen, it wouldn't matter, for I am not going back. I cannot live with him any more," and with fresh hysterical sobs she told him of the last violent scene with her husband. Gradually, out of her confused account, he gathered what had really happened, and his compassion was once more aroused for this weak and trembling creature, who was ready to commit almost any crime for his sake. He was astonished and amused, in the midst of his anxiety, to notice how utterly incapable she appeared to be of realising the possible consequences of her action ; the enormity of betraying her country's secrets—even though unwittingly—to a foreigner, never seemed to strike her feminine intelligence in the least degree ; but, like a true woman, she cried out in abject terror that the General had threatened to call in the police. That she should have incurred liability to a penalty under the law was appalling to her ; she could lie to her husband or her friends, but she had a sort of feeling that the mere presence of a policeman would force her to tell the truth.

The situation, in fact, seemed serious enough to Count Bartoloff. If it were true that the General was determined to find the thief, it might be very awkward for him, now that suspicions were aroused as regards Lady Browne. For even if she remained firm, and refused to witness against him,

Carlotta had that very day been employed to carry a packet from his lodgings to the General's house, and if this fact were discovered, the clue might be followed up. There was, moreover, the registered packet at the Post Office which might be traced, even stopped, before it left the island. The only thing possible seemed to be to embark in the first vessel of whatever kind that was sailing.

Lady Browne jumped at the idea. Her one longing was to depart, the sooner the better.

"The Sicilian Packet is leaving this afternoon, as usual, I suppose," he said; "if there is nothing earlier, we can go by that. If you will sit here, I will go down and see about it."

"Oh, don't leave me! Let me come with you!" she implored. "I cannot bear to be left alone. They might come here and find me, and take me to prison. Let me go with you, Leo!"

He could not resist her prayers and tears, but he told her that she would of course run the risk of recognition.

"Why did you not put on a faldetta?" he asked.

"Because Anderson was in the hall. The General had told him to see that nobody came into the library, so he himself was waiting outside the door. I knew he must have heard the General storming at me, so I was afraid he would guess something, if I went out in a faldetta."



"Well," said the Count, "wash your eyes and make yourself look *comme il faut*, and we will get into the first carrozze we see, and call at the different steamer offices. Have you nothing with you?"

"Only this little bag. I put some of my jewels into it, but I dared not wait; I thought the police might come."

The Count took out some money from his safe, relieved Lady Browne of her bag, and went into the street with her. There was no one about except a few street lads with masks, and they speedily found a carrozze, and drew the curtains round it. The day was windy and stormy, so there was some excuse for this, and Lady Browne sat inside while Count Bartoloff went into the different offices of the steamer companies. There was, however, no packet to be found which left before the Sicilian boat, about five o'clock that afternoon, and the Count advised Emmeline to go on board at once. He would engage a lady's cabin for her, he said, and she could sit there, while he returned to wind up his affairs in the town.

"There are one or two things I must do," he said, "but you may be sure I shall not be longer than I can possibly help. Would you like to send a note to your maid? Could you trust her to pack up any of your things for you, or perhaps even to come

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with you? You will be very uncomfortable without her, and with none of your clothes."

But Emmeline would not hear of any communications being opened with the house she was leaving. She burst into a fresh flood of tears when the Count, having placed her in her little cabin, turned to go. She clung round his neck with passionate embraces, sobbing that he was all she had now in the world, and that he must not leave her long alone. When he was gone, she cried till she could cry no more, and then began to feel very faint and weak from want of food, for she had eaten no breakfast.

She rang and begged the stewardess to bring her something to eat, and while she was waiting for it, she lay down on her berth, and fell into a kind of doze. The sound of voices roused her; she started up, and thinking the stewardess was bringing her some food, opened the door. What was her astonishment and horror to see, immediately facing her, on the other side of the narrow passage, Canon Curteis, who was being shown round the accommodation by the steward.

"Oh! how do you do, Lady Browne?" said the Canon, "are you seeing any friends off? I am thinking of going back to England by this route in two or three weeks. Do you recommend it?"

"I—I don't know, I am sure," stammered Lady Browne. "I—I am not seeing anyone off. I am

going myself. Oh! do let me speak to you for a moment." She glanced at the steward, who was standing by, and Canon Curteis courteously dismissed him, saying he would speak to him presently.

Then he came, and sat down in Lady Browne's little cabin, leaving the door open. She seated herself on the edge of her berth, behind the door, so that she could not be seen by anyone passing, but as she did not speak at first, he said very quietly and gravely, "What is the matter?"

"Don't tell anybody you have seen me here," she said, beginning to cry again; "I am running away from my husband. He threatened me and terrified me so this morning that I dare not stay."

A few questions now brought out the whole miserable story, but the things that had seemed natural and even praiseworthy in the doing, seemed strangely different as she related them to the priest, with his keen eyes, set in his emaciated face, watching her unsparingly.

He had no words of pity for her; she had wasted plenty of self-pity, he thought, and what she now needed was to have her conscience awakened. Step by step, he showed her how she had sinned, and how one sin had led to another. Her husband's behaviour had, he said, nothing to do with it; by her own she had forfeited all right to his tenderness and respect.

She had bound herself by her vows for life, and sin could not release her from them. Sternly he pointed out the consequences both in this life and hereafter, the inevitable disenchantment, the miserable mutual doubtings and jealousy, the longings for her little daughter, the terrible remorse, the *déclassé* life, the sinking ever lower, the vengeance of Eternal Purity overtaking her even here, with awful forecasts of the yet more terrible hereafter.

Then, when she seemed on the point of yielding, he told her that the way of repentance and restitution was still open, that she could still return to her husband, make full confession of her sin, and work out her penance and eventual salvation by submitting loyally to whatever he might inflict upon her. She must remember that the whole of her life could not atone for the injury she had done him, but that it was her duty, and her only chance of saving herself from a worse fall, to go home immediately and offer at least to resume her position as head of his house.

She listened with downcast head. The severe sentence struck her with dismay, but the awfulness of moral purity shone upon her for the first time, and she saw herself degraded and dishonoured.

"But I need not betray Leo, need I?" she asked, at last.

Throughout the whole conversation she had spoken of her lover as Leo, and Canon Curteis had of course not asked his name. He replied that he did not see that it was her duty to do so, unless it was in any way necessary to Sir William Browne to know who her accomplice had been.

The conversation had once been interrupted by the arrival of the food for which Emmeline had asked ; she did not touch it, but Canon Curteis saw that she was in a state of complete exhaustion, and insisted on her eating and drinking, after which he finished what he had to say ; and when she no longer resisted his authoritative directions, he asked her whether he should see her home, or whether she would prefer that he should stay on board until Leo returned.

She enquired whether what she had told him was absolutely safe with him, and he replied, "I shall consider it as if it were under the seal of confession."

Then she said, "I will go home alone, and I would rather you saw Leo, and told him why I am not here. Tell him my heart is breaking, but I shall try and lead a better life. *He* won't care much," she added, with a dry sob ; "he will forget all about me very soon."

"Don't dwell on thoughts of him at all, my child," said the priest, in a more compassionate tone than he had yet used ; "drive them away

bravely. Don't look back on the past; its memories are full of danger to you. Look forward to the duties which you have to take up, and which you have so long neglected. I will call late this afternoon, if you will allow me, and see you, and perhaps Sir William."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE GOVERNOR

SIR WILLIAM BROWNE left his house, as we have seen, in an excited frame of mind, but the fresh air speedily induced cooler reflections. He had had no very clear idea as to where he was going, but his object had been to obtain vengeance on the culprit, even if it should be his own wife. As he hurried down Strada Reale, however, he began to realise that an immediate appeal to the police would place all Malta at once in possession of his painful dilemma. A man whose secret drawer has been opened, is inevitably placed in a ridiculous position, even if no worse consequences need be apprehended, and the General, like most military men, did not appreciate being laughed at. His pace grew slower as he considered the matter, and at last, when he had nearly reached Porta Reale, he stopped altogether, then turned back and slowly walked towards the street where his colleague, General Simpson, was living. He had resolved to take advice from this friend, who was of the highest

standing in every way, and whom he had known for many years.

The conversation between the two men was of the gravest description and of considerable length. Sir William Browne drew the key papers from his pocket, and General Simpson examined them carefully, but could discover nothing from them, beyond the fact that they had been folded.

The story was so extraordinary altogether that it was very difficult to form any opinion. In the absence of further proof against Lady Browne, General Simpson declined to believe her guilty. He thought privately that Sir William had probably been the thief himself, not intentionally—for his present state of perturbation proved the impossibility of that,—but some evening when he had not been quite master of himself, for it was notorious that since Count Bartoloff's arrival in Valetta, he had been drinking a good deal; some people said the Russian, who, like most of his countrymen, had a head of iron, encouraged him to drink for the sake of amusement; others thought Sir William sought to drown home cares and disappointments.

However that might be, he had been seen at the Club more than once, distinctly under the influence of liquor, and for a man in his position this was very serious, indeed, almost unprecedented. It was believed that rumours to his disadvantage had reached the Horse-Guards, and General Simpson

felt at once that this singular story suggested hallucination or irresponsible action of some kind, and would be very unfavourably commented on at headquarters.

He strongly dissuaded Sir William from calling in the police, at least until he had laid the whole matter before the Governor. The first thing to be done was therefore to go to the Palace, and request an interview with him as soon as possible. It chanced, however, that the Governor was engaged that morning with his Maltese Council, and Sir William was begged to call again in the afternoon. In the interval he returned home, and found Anderson still keeping sentry over the study, and released him and the household from the species of imprisonment in which they had been kept all the morning. The butler asked if he would have lunch, and he replied that he would have some cold meat in the study. "Tell her ladyship I do not wish to be disturbed."

"Her ladyship is not at 'ome, Sir William."

"Oh, indeed! When did she go out?"

"Soon after you left the 'ouse, Sir William. Her ladyship did not say when she would be back. Shall I serve lunch in the dining-room to Miss Blanche and Madimiselle?"

"Yes, certainly," said the General, testily.

He was calmer than he had been three hours previously, but not less anxious. Indeed, he had

received but small consolation from his visit to General Simpson, and his approaching interview with the Governor was not likely to be of an enlivening description. Sir Horace Barton was not, at the best, a very sympathetic person, and being just now tired and ill at the end of his three years' service, he would probably receive with scant courtesy anyone who came to add so materially to his worries and his correspondence. However, the ordeal had to be faced, and to the Palace Sir William went, at the earliest possible moment, and after waiting about half an hour was shown into the Governor's presence.

Sir Horace had of course no idea why Sir William wished to see him, and apologised for the delay. "These Maltese fellows talk quite interminably," he said, "I couldn't get away from them. I have barely had time to swallow my lunch. Now, then, what is it?"

It was not easy to begin. Sir William grunted, cleared his throat, then spoke hurriedly and rather confusedly.

"Stop a moment," said the Governor, when he had related how he had missed the key, forced the drawer, and found that certain papers were gone; "how long was it since you last used the key?"

"I cannot say exactly—a week or ten days, perhaps a fortnight."

"So the key may have been missing all that time."

"I do not think so. I should have noticed its absence."

"But you did not notice it until you wanted to open the drawer. Are you quite sure the papers were there last time you opened the drawer?"

"Quite certain."

"Well, go on."

Sir William then related how the papers and key had been brought to him by his soldier-servant, and all that had passed between him and the butler.

"And do you suspect anyone?" asked the Governor.

"I cannot tell whom to suspect, unless it is my wife. She denies all knowledge of it, of course."

The Governor looked incredulous. "Let me see the papers," he said.

His face became extremely grave as he glanced over them. "I suppose you know that I should be fully justified in placing you under arrest for gross breach of trust!" he said, looking up at last.

The General, usually so boisterously voluble, had not a word to say. His face, sunburnt and ruddy as it always was, had turned a ghastly grey colour, and his mouth was working, but he was literally unable to articulate. The Governor saw his terrible distress, and softened slightly in his tone.

"However, considering your rank and position here, I do not think it desirable to do so on my own responsibility. I shall telegraph to head-

quarters at once and ask for instructions. Now I need not detain you any further, but of course if you discover anything more you will let me know immediately."

"You do not wish me to call in the police?"

"Certainly not before I hear from the Horse-Guards. Keep the matter perfectly quiet. How many people know of it now?"

"Only yourself and Simpson besides my wife. The servants of course know of the loss of the key, but unless they stole them they have no idea of the contents of the papers."

"Very well. Let it go no further."

"I hope, sir," said Sir William, as he rose to go, "that all my previous services will be taken into consideration. That a thing like this should happen at all is of course a most terrible blow to me."

"I have nothing to do but to leave the decision to the Commander-in-Chief," said the Governor, coldly; "it will not rest with me. Good-afternoon."

More miserably anxious than ever, Sir William went home, and as soon as he arrived received a message from his wife, begging him to come and speak to her in the morning-room. He entered, wondering what she would say, after the manner in which they had parted some hours previously, but her appearance startled him so much that he almost forgot his angry suspicions. She was deadly white, except round the eyelids, which were red and swollen,

and looked as if she were in the last stage of exhaustion, and indeed she could hardly speak above a whisper. She told him that she had a confession to make. "It was I who took your key off your watch-chain," she said; "I did it while you were asleep."

"Oh, you did, did you?" said the General. "And you took the papers out of my drawer?"

"No."

"Well, then, you let some one else do so."

"I can't tell you any more."

"Oh, you can't? We will find means to make you. Who saw the papers?"

"I can't tell you."

"Did anyone see them besides you?"

"I never saw them."

"Well, did anyone see them?"

"Yes."

"How many people?"

"I don't know."

"Oh! they may have been taken all over Malta, I suppose. How long had they been out of my drawer?"

"Only one day—since yesterday morning."

"Confound you! what did you do it for?"

"Because—because—oh! don't ask me any more! I can't tell you. I am dreadfully sorry I did, and I want to confess my part in it all, but I can't tell you anything else about that, only I have something to tell you about other things I have done."

"I don't want to hear anything else; I don't care a damn what you have done, except about these papers. I want to know where they have been, and who has seen them, and if you won't tell me, perhaps you will tell the Governor. I have just come from him, I shall let him know what you have told me, and perhaps he will be able to bring you to reason. I should have thought it would not be very pleasant to you to know that you were the cause of your husband's ruin."

Emmeline seemed to have no more tears to shed.

"I am terribly unhappy about it," she said; "but as the harm has been done, I don't see that I can make things better by telling you any more."

"It is quite impossible that you can judge," he replied; "if you profess to be sorry, you should show it in the only way that is left. Now, for the last time, will you tell me, or will you not?"

"I can't tell you yet," she answered; "perhaps I will, to-morrow."

With an oath he turned away and went into his room and wrote a letter to the Governor describing what had passed; he went down himself to the Palace and asked if he could see the Governor, but the answer was that his Excellency was engaged and had given strict orders that he was not to be disturbed—so he left the note with an aide-de-camp, begging that it might be sent in immediately.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TOO LATE !

CANON CURTEIS waited for some time on board the Sicilian Packet before Count Bartoloff returned. When he did arrive it was impossible to recognise him, for he had on a long beard and iron-grey wig, but he directed his steps at once to Lady Browne's cabin and was considerably startled at finding it only occupied by an English clergyman. He was about to retire, in order to make enquiries from the stewardess, when Canon Curteis asked if he were looking for a lady. He replied in the affirmative, and the Canon told him what had happened. "I persuaded the poor woman to go home," he said, and he gave him Lady Browne's message.

"By Jove, you have done me a good turn, though you did not intend to," said the Count ; "it was embarrassing to have a woman tacked on to one, and she is much better at home. She would have got tired of life with me in a fortnight."

Canon Curteis had fully expected, from all that

he had previously heard, to see Count Bartoloff, and was surprised at the appearance of this elderly stranger, whose manner, too, was so utterly heartless, that he felt that any words from him were not likely to have much effect; but he could not let him go without some warning of the consequences of such a life as he was leading.

The man only laughed. "It is correct for you to talk like that, no doubt, but in the twentieth century we have lost all faith in everything but the devil, and we have not much even of that. I am a little in advance of my age, and I believe in nothing but my brain and my body. I am made like this, and I cannot help it. If you have any complaints to make, make them to Nature, or Fate, or whatever you call the thing that made me—if anything did."

There was no use in casting pearls before swine, so the Canon left the ship, and went in to the little fisherman's church near the Custom House, where he found a congregation of very poor people listening in rapt attention to a sermon in Maltese. The sight, when he swung back the heavy leathern curtain, was very striking—the contrast between the grey daylight outside with its cold, stormy atmosphere and the brightly lighted little church, gaudy with brilliant colours and tinsel ornaments and heated almost to suffocation by the innumerable candles and the hundreds of human beings,

all working folk in their ordinary clothes, crowded together in the narrow space. Canon Curteis sighed as he watched the earnest, upturned faces, and wished that the congregations to whom he preached were often as attentive and as near nature as these devout and uneducated children of the South.

The sermon lasted some time, and when it was over, twilight was beginning to draw on. Canon Curteis went to see Lady Browne, who told him of her interview with her husband, and asked what she ought to do. Must she tell him who had seen the papers? The Canon was decidedly of opinion that she must now do so; he had not realised before what the papers were, but he did not think she was justified in shielding her lover any longer.

Lady Browne was submissive even in this. She had fallen completely under the influence of Canon Curteis, for, being a weak woman by nature and training, she required some man to whom she could look for direction. There always had been some one man who had exercised an overwhelming influence over her actions and even her thoughts, but up to this time that influence had not often been good. The future would prove if she had the strength and persistence to continue to lead a new life when her new guide could no longer be constantly at her side.

Sir William Browne had gone out again, so that

the completion of her confession had to be delayed for a little while. Meanwhile, the Governor had been considering the letter which the aide-de-camp had brought him from Sir William, and had sent for General Simpson in order to talk the matter over with him.

General Simpson confessed that the letter was a surprise to him, but he saw no reason to doubt its truth, except that it was impossible to guess Lady Browne's object in the theft.

"There must have been someone behind her," said the Governor. "Is there not some story of an intrigue between her and that Russian Count, who has been hanging about here all the winter?"

"Of course!" exclaimed General Simpson. "Your Excellency has no doubt hit the nail on the head. There have been rumours that the man was a spy, but no one believed it. He has evidently wormed himself into the Brownes' confidence in order to discover our secrets. How clever these chaps are!"

"We have no time to admire his talents just now," said the Governor, drily. "He must be arrested at once and examined. Do you know his address?"

"He is often to be found at the Club. I know he was there this morning, for I happened to see him. At any rate the porter would know where he lives."

The Superintendent of Police was immediately sent for, and informed that Count Bartoloff was "wanted"; his agents began to work at once, but the Count was more easily "wanted" than found. His address was known at the Club, but his rooms were deserted. The woman who kept the house said that he had had all his things removed that morning, and she believed he had gone in the Sicilian boat, which had left at five in the afternoon. The police accordingly went to the steamer office, and found that a berth had been engaged in his name, and telegrams were dispatched to the British Consul at Syracuse, desiring him to watch the Count on his arrival, but the Consul wired back the next morning to say that Count Bartoloff had not crossed in the boat; his luggage was on board, but he himself was nowhere to be found. Fresh search was therefore made for him in Valetta, but he had entirely disappeared, nor could he be traced on board any ship that had left Malta during the past twenty-four hours. All through Ash-Wednesday the hunt continued, and with diminished vigour until the end of the week. By that time the Superintendent of Police was satisfied that the object of their search was, at any rate, not on the island.

It may be added here that a cargo boat, about to return to Tunis, had on that eventful Tuesday come into the Grand Harbour, and that Count Bax-

toloff, disguised as he was, had shipped on board her, having nothing with him but the little bag containing jewels, which Lady Browne had forgotten and had left in her cabin. He considered that the contents of this bag might repay him for his lost luggage, and for the money which Sir William Browne owed him, and that it was rightfully his property, especially as it was now impossible for him to restore it to its owner. He was afraid lest his voice should have betrayed him to Canon Curteis, and determined not to sail in the Sicilian Packet ; but in order to throw the authorities off the scent, in case they should try to catch him, he left his luggage on board and actually engaged a berth in his own name. Then, as has been said, he went on board the Tunis cargo-boat, which sailed before daylight the following morning. He was thus successful in eluding all pursuit, and thus also Lady Browne's complete confession, when she at last made it to her husband, came too late either to assist him, or to injure the Count.

Sir William did not lay a finger on her, did not even swear at her, but he refused to join her at meals, and ordered her to have nothing to do with their little daughter ; if he discovered her disobeying him in this respect, he said he should simply turn her out of doors, though he did not care to make a public scandal. For the rest, he was sunk in a sullen despair himself, awaiting

the reply from the Horse-Guards to the Governor's telegrams and despatches. It was not long in coming. Before a week had passed an order came that Sir William Browne was to be relieved of his command. His successor was gazetted simultaneously, and two days after receiving the order from the Governor, Sir William and Lady Browne, with their little girl and her French governess, embarked for England.

"Half-pay at Peckham Rye," he said to the friends who came to see them off.

No one except the Governor and General Simpson knew exactly what had happened, but rumours were rife, and mostly connected with Emmeline, and with Count Bartoloff's disappearance, and many among the military officers in Malta felt deep sympathy with the fallen General, who had been passionately devoted to the Service in which he had risen so high, but in which he was never likely to be employed again.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE ELOPEMENT

THE Carnival Ball at the Palace is always a very brilliant affair. No plain clothes are permitted, but many uniforms mix with the fancy dresses. It is related that some years ago one Governor's wife refused to allow any uniforms, and that the indignant Post-Captains, all of respectable age, and some of them of very comfortable proportions, revenged themselves by all appearing in the white caps and aprons of their respective cooks. At any rate, a similar rule was never proposed again, but most of the soldiers, many of the younger sailors, and all the few civilians, came in fancy dress, and of course all the ladies. The mixture of colours, of periods and nations represented, of beautiful and grotesque, of historical and allegorical, lent the scene all the usual interest and amusement that attaches to a fancy-dress ball anywhere ; but there are few settings in which a lovely costume, a fair face or fine jewels look so well as in the old Palace of the Knights. The Armoury, with its relics of

battered helmets and shields, its quaint collection of arms, its ancient swords and banners, all its memories of far-off chivalry, and of that world-famous duel between the Moslem and the Christian, which made Malta, for a time, as it were, the centre of the civilized world. This great gallery was brilliantly lighted, and among the motionless armed figures paraded the beauty, youth, and fashion of English and Maltese Society ; as if trying, in the velvet, lace, and tinsel with which they had dressed themselves up, to forget that they belonged to this unartistic and prosaic twentieth century.

Lady Maude Beaufoy was gorgeous as Mme. de Pompadour ; Margaret wore a graceful dress of pale green and white, as a daisy ; Dr Masters, who accompanied them, was in the crimson robes of a Doctor of Medicine, which made a splendid piece of vivid colour.

At lunch that day there had been a great discussion as to the evening arrangements, and Lady Maude had been excessively angry when Christopher had coolly announced that they were not to wait for him, as he had an engagement in Valetta and might not arrive at the Palace till late, possibly not at all.

"But, Christopher, I insist on your coming ; of course, I expected that you would accompany us. It is not often that I interfere with your engage-

ments, but really, I do think you might have kept this evening open; you have known for weeks that there was this ball, and I took the trouble to order a dress for you from Nathan's, and everything."

"I am very sorry to disappoint you, mother, but I really cannot help it."

"Nonsense! Send an excuse."

"I cannot."

"Why?"

"I will explain to you why some other day."

"Oh! I daresay! It is too bad, Christopher. You give me less and less of your society, and I never know where you go, or whom you are with. I don't expect you to be tied to my apron strings, but I do expect reasonable civility, and I don't get it."

There was no answer from her son, and she went on, with increased irritation. "It is so cool of you, too, to leave the care of us to Dr Masters!"

"Oh! the doctor don't mind—do you, doctor?" said Christopher, lazily looking up.

"Not at all; on the contrary, it is a great pleasure," replied Dr Masters.

"Of course you must say so!" retorted Lady Maude, rising from the table in high dudgeon; "but it does not make it any the less rude of Christopher. Now remember, Christopher, I shall never forgive you if you don't come to the ball

in time to take us home," and she swept out of the room with her head very high.

The scene had been a painful one, for the spectators felt that though it was characteristic of Lady Maude that she should not shrink from reproaching her son in public, yet that she was really justified in what she had said ; Christopher had of late spent hardly any time at Bello Sguardo, he was nearly always out in the evening, and had entirely neglected his mother's guests. Only Dr Masters knew the reason, and knew also that that very evening Christopher and Signorina Bianchi were to embark secretly for Syracuse. The little lady had been latterly much persecuted by the *primo tenore*, who had obtained some kind of promise of marriage from her during the early days of her stay in Valetta, and who was bitterly jealous of Christopher, whom he knew to be constantly hovering about her house. This man terrified her by holding over her the threat of the Maltese "impedimenta," a law or custom by which any man or woman who has entered into an engagement but has afterwards broken it off, is forbidden to marry anyone else while the other party makes a remonstrance. It is therefore within the bounds of possibility that a girl might in her early youth engage herself to marry a man whom she afterwards found she could not love, and that she might be prevented from marrying anyone else

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in Malta for the rest of her life; or similarly, that a young man might become attached to a girl and make her a promise of marriage, but might afterwards jilt her, and be unable to marry any other woman until his first love was either married or dead, or withdrew her prior claims.

This custom, which seems strange and hard in our easy-going days, is of course the survival of the mediæval betrothal, which was only less sacred and binding than marriage itself. At any rate, it placed the Signorina in an awkward position, and necessitated her secret departure from Malta. Christopher managed everything for her, with the help of Dr Masters, who was interested in the singular little drama. He had never imagined a man like Beaufoy would seriously resolve on marrying an Italian singer; still less did he think that he would have had the strength of mind to carry the matter through. Christopher, however, was more and more in love with Maddalena as time went on. He liked her shrewd simplicity, and her total difference from all the young ladies of his acquaintance, so that he was perfectly satisfied with his choice and more than ever determined to face any of its possible consequences. His regret at annoying his mother was calm, but sincere, and he believed that she would speedily become reconciled to the inevitable; in this, *perhaps*, he was unduly optimistic, since Lady

Maude was very tenacious of her own way, and deeply resented any crossing of her will.

The details of the Signorina's flight had therefore been carefully arranged by Christopher and Dr Masters, and the evening of the Carnival Ball had been selected as the most suitable for various reasons, among which was the fact that the *primo tenore* himself was going to the ball and would be occupied in a somewhat elaborate toilette, and that Maddalena could plead the same excuse for admitting no visitors.

The old aunt who acted as her duenna had been kept in ignorance until the last moment, in order that she might not betray the secret to anyone, and everything was successfully carried out. The two ladies and their maids were escorted to the ship by Dr Masters, and on board met Christopher, who had previously conveyed the luggage and engaged berths. As they came on board they passed Count Bartoloff, who was leaving the ship, but of course did not recognise him in his disguise.

When the last bell had rung, Dr Masters' hand was grasped more warmly by Christopher than ever before. "I am awfully grateful to you, doctor," he said.

"I wish you good luck and happiness, Beaufoy," was the doctor's reply; "but my hardest task is still before me. I cannot imagine what your mother will say when she knows."

"Well, make what excuses you can to-night, and to-morrow you can give her my letter. I will write again as soon as we are spliced. I expect you will find us all a regular happy family by the autumn."

"I hope so," said Dr Masters, and hurried down the ship's side into the dghaiso that was waiting for him.

He looked into the Club on his way back to Bello Sguardo ; rumours were already beginning to circulate as to some mysterious crime for which Count Bartoloff was being pursued by the police, and this news when repeated at dinner caused some diversion to Lady Maude's thoughts, which were still inclined to harp on her son's defection.

Margaret, though much annoyed with the Count's behaviour the previous day, and fully resolved to give him no kind of encouragement in future, was not prepared to look on him as a criminal, and was inclined to treat the story with ridicule. Ethel, afraid of hurting Margaret's feelings, in her ignorance of the girl's exact position as regards her Russian admirer, made no remark, and Canon Curteis, who usually did not allow any uncharitable suggestions to be made in his presence, was also silent. Lady Maude loved a sensation, and entirely forgetting or ignoring all that she had said to Ethel two days previously in the Count's favour, declared *now* that she had never trusted him, that she was

sure he was a Nihilist dynamiter, and that it would be a mercy if they were not all blown up at the ball, after which she went upstairs for her last beautifying touches, and to put on the splendid velvet fur-lined cloak which her son had given her at Christmas.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PALACE BALL

LADY MAUDE never arrived very early at any party, and when she reached the Palace, the rooms were already crowded, and the first Quadrille was being danced, in elaborate early Victorian costumes. Lady Maude sat down on the dais beside the Governor, who was trying, not very successfully, to banish from his face the traces of those cares that were lying heavy on his mind. Margaret was carried off by General Simpson, who was almost unrecognizable in a splendid Arab dress, to walk round the galleries, stopping often on the way to speak to various friends and admire their costumes. Isabel Jarvis had clothed herself in a daring and appropriate manner as a wasp, in black and gold with gossamer wings ; her mother was ill in bed, and she had been therefore, as usual, wandering round in search of a chaperon. Her first attempt had been with Lady Browne, but to her astonishment she had failed altogether to obtain admission there. The servant had persisted in saying that

her ladyship was too unwell to receive anyone, and she was obliged to retire discomfited.

After one other unsuccessful attempt elsewhere, she had resolved boldly to come to the Palace alone and wait in the cloak-room till someone of her acquaintance came in. The first person she knew happened to be Mrs Thompson, to whom she said, "I shall consider you as my chaperon." Mrs Thompson was aghast.

"We are going away before supper," she said. "We do not intend to stay long."

"Oh! that doesn't matter," said Isabel. "I shan't bother you much. It is only for form's sake. I can easily find somebody to come away with."

Miss Jarvis was full of the story that Count Bartoloff was being pursued by the police, and she immediately connected Lady Browne's illness and absence from the ball with this rumour. "That woman has no proper sense of pride," she declared; "she ought to have made a point of showing herself here, and pretending not to care. I wonder how Miss Somers feels."

The insinuation made gentle Mrs Thompson angry.

"I am not aware that it would affect Miss Somers more than anyone else."

"Oh, well!" said Isabel, with a laugh and a toss of her head, "of course one can shut one's eyes to

anything, but if you had been at Count Bartoloff's picnic yesterday, you would have seen those two riding up alone together, and it was quite obvious that *something* had happened. I would bet anything you like that he had proposed to her. Of course she may not have accepted him, but if she did not mean to, she ought never have allowed him to go such lengths."

It was difficult to answer this, for Mrs Thompson, fond as she was of Margaret, partly agreed with it, and she hated to think that it was in the power of anyone to make such remarks with some show of truth.

Margaret, meanwhile, as she walked about with her elderly cavalier, met various of her usual partners, who engaged her for different dances later on, and her programme was nearly full when she returned to Lady Maude. It was not till almost midnight, when she was standing near a window with her partner, that she suddenly caught sight of Arthur Gordon, entering the room by a door opposite her. It was easy to recognise him, for he was in uniform, but he looked thinner and browner than when he had left Malta. He did not see her at first, but went through the room, smiling and shaking hands right and left, as his various acquaintances in their eccentric costumes greeted him and congratulated him on his safe return.

Margaret's heart beat quickly as she watched

him, and she found it rather hard to go on talking to her partner. A few minutes later, when the waltz was over, she was standing by Lady Maude, and answering some remark of the Governor's, when Arthur came up and made his bow to his host. Sir Horace received him very graciously, and asked when he had arrived.

"Only an hour ago, sir," replied Arthur; "I found your invitation on my cabin table and got into my uniform as quickly as I could."

"Well, I hope you will have a pleasant evening," said the Governor. "I hear your expedition has been a great success. Come to-morrow morning and tell me all about it."

"Thank you, sir," said Arthur, and turned round to find himself face to face with Margaret. He had tormented himself many times on his return voyage as to how Margaret would receive him, but here, with a crowd of people looking on, and with all the intoxication of dance and music, lights and flowers, there was no time to think. He was conscious of a thrill of pleasure that she should have heard the Governor's kind words, and then he knew that she smiled and held out her hand, and that he said: "Are you engaged for this dance?" They moved off together, but it all seemed more like a delicious dream than reality.

"Shall we dance, or talk?" he said, when her hand was on his arm.

"Talk, I think," she replied, smiling, and out to the gallery they went and found two luxurious chairs, where they seated themselves to converse at ease.

"I am in luck to come back in time for this," he exclaimed; "we had an awful tossing too, I was afraid that they would not come in after dark, and we should have the pleasure of spending the night outside."

"I suppose I must not ask any questions as to where you have been and what you have been doing?" she said.

"I suppose not," he replied, laughing; "we have had a capital time and some real good sport, though it was a rum affair altogether."

"Why did you never come to say good-bye to us before you went? It was dreadfully rude of you," said Margaret, suddenly.

"Because I had no time. I did think of writing—and then—then I fancied perhaps you would not like it—that you would think me a bore—or something."

"Vain excuses!" she retorted, gaily. "I believe you were so excited at the idea of going off on this mission that you forgot about everything else."

"Well, I was keen to go, of course; it was a splendid chance, and I have enjoyed it tremendously, but I didn't forget you. I seem to have been *thinking* about you all the time. Now tell me what

has been going on here—I have had no time yet to pick up the news, except about poor old Barclay.”

“Yes, poor Mr Barclay! Everyone was dreadfully sorry when he died. I was to have gone up to the Hospital that very morning with Colonel Thompson, but I put it off till the next day, and then it was too late.”

“Poor chap! He was a great loss to me, as well as to the Service. He was in the *Britannia* with me, and he was always just ahead of me in everything. Major Martin would have taken him instead of me if he had not been ill.”

“Sailors seem to get very fond of each other,” said Margaret.

“Oh! One gets attached to one’s messmates, but we are so scattered and changed about that one has not the chance of making friendships like a shore-going fellow. Barclay was the greatest friend I had. We used even to write to each other sometimes when we were on different stations.” He broke off, and began in another tone, “Oh! I say! what a dress that is at the end of the gallery. What are those queer wings meant for?”

“That is Miss Jarvis,” said Margaret, “you will see in a moment when she turns her head. No one would have dared to suggest that she should call herself a wasp, but it is very becoming.”

Arthur laughed. “Has she been stinging much lately?”

"She stung me badly yesterday, but I deserved it," said Margaret, briefly.

"You! nonsense!"

"We need not discuss it; it was unpleasant, if salutary," she replied, lightly.

Arthur was burning to ask a question; he hesitated, then out it came. "And what has become of that Russian fellow? Is he here to-night?"

"I don't know," said Margaret.

Arthur froze suddenly at this curt reply, and there was an awkward silence between them, which was broken by one of Margaret's partners, who had been hunting for her for some time. She went off at once, only saying over her shoulder to Arthur, "Come and see us soon," in a tone of (as he imagined) cool indifference. He felt himself dismissed for the evening, and descended at once from the pinnacle of happiness on which he had been elevated for half an hour. He did not dance much, but employed himself chiefly in chatting with his men friends and picking up the threads of Malta gossip. The first thing he heard was, of course, the story of Count Bartoloff's disappearance, together with many details of the latter's behaviour as regards Lady Browne and others, some of them being true and some false—but of Margaret's supposed interest in the Count, Arthur learnt little, as most people suspected him of being attached to her himself. At supper time, however, he found

himself close to Isabel Jarvis, who, being at the moment partnerless and very hungry, suggested that he might take her in to get some refreshment, as he appeared to be doing nothing particular.

"What is your definition of doing something particular?" he asked, as they went into the supper-room.

"At a ball there are only three possible things to do," she replied at once, "dancing, flirting, or eating. I have been doing the first and you the second, so now we may as well do the third."

"Combining the second with it perhaps," he said.

"Oh! if you like!" said Isabel; "but as a rule you keep all your flirtations for Miss Somers. It is as well that you should know how she has been amusing herself with Count Bartoloff while you have been away."

"Count Bartoloff seems to create a deal of interest just now," said Arthur, trying to look indifferent.

"Yes; they say he has bolted. I expect it was time. Sir William Browne ought to have put a bullet through him long ago. I should have thought any decent girl would have seen through him, but Miss Somers seemed to enjoy his attentions, let him chaperon her to riding parties and all sorts of things. He quite took your place in fact, and I was prepared to see in the *Malta*

Chronicle that a marriage had been arranged between——”

“That is going rather far, don’t you think?” said Arthur, who longed to know everything, and yet felt a traitor for listening.

“You may make yourself easy, I should think,” replied Isabel, “the marriage is not likely to come off. They say that Mr Beaufoy is really very much in love with that little Italian *prima donna* who had such a beautiful voice, but only sang a few times. Was she ill before you left? I forget. I should like to see Lady Maude’s face when somebody tells her. Of course she knows nothing. People never do see what concerns them most nearly. By-the-by, are we to have war? I suppose you know all about it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” said Arthur. “Indeed, on your showing I ought to know less than you, for it certainly concerns me more nearly.”

“Perhaps it does in a sense, but I should be very sorry if all my partners here were killed off.”

“They would not all be killed,” he replied; “some of them would get rapid promotion.”

She laughed. “I suppose that is what you expect yourself. Of course you long for a war.”

“Oh, no!” cried Arthur, more earnestly, “I don’t want to go to war unless it is absolutely necessary; that I can’t judge, but if it is to be, I should think now is as good a time as any; perhaps if we struck

one hard blow at once, it would soon be over, and we might all breathe more quietly afterwards."

"Now we are doing an unpardonable thing," cried Isabel, "discussing politics at a dance! Thanks so much. I feel ever so much better for my supper. Shall we go back to the ball-room?"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DOCTOR'S DISMISSAL

LADY MAUDE behaved in an altogether unexpected manner when Dr Masters delivered to her her son's letter announcing his departure and intended marriage. She kept outwardly calm, but it was the calm of a white heat; she asked a few questions as to the share the doctor had taken in the affair, and then took her revenge promptly, so far as Dr Masters was concerned, by telling him that she should no longer require his services, writing him out a cheque on the spot, and absolutely dismissing him.

The doctor was startled, but of course could not argue with his patroness, or defend his conduct. He went in to say good-bye to Ethel in a very depressed frame of mind, and was touched and concerned to see that she took his departure very much to heart.

Ethel had, as we have seen, started with no great liking or respect for the doctor, but his invariable patience and courtesy under many

provocations, and his careful attention to herself, had made her greatly alter her opinion of him; and in her delicate state of health she disliked and dreaded the idea of having to put herself into the hands of a stranger.

Dr Masters promised to do all he could for her by talking her case carefully over with the best Maltese practitioner, and, said he, "I shall not leave the island for a day or two. I will go to a hotel to-night, and if Lady Maude should change her mind, you have only to tell me and I will come back and look after you; I am very sorry to leave you now."

"Thank you," said Ethel, rather tremulously; "I have never been nervous in my life before, but I feel a dreadful coward just now."

"Oh! that is natural," said Dr Masters, "it constantly happens. It does not in the least mean that there is any real cause for alarm. Your nerves will recover their normal tone as soon as your troubles are over. Try not to worry yourself about anything, and amuse yourself with your music and your books. Your husband might just send me a wire by-and-by, to say you are all right."

"Thank you," said Ethel, again; "I will tell him."

She took the first opportunity of remonstrating with her cousin on the doctor's summary dismissal, but found her quite obdurate.

"It is abominable ingratitude on his part," said

Lady Maude; "he knows the one thing I could never stand is a theatrical daughter-in-law. I have done everything for him. I have introduced him to hundreds of patients, I have really made his fortune, and now, the first opportunity he has, he takes Christopher's part against me! It is quite unpardonable. I never intend to see him again.

"As for Christopher, he is dead and buried to me," she added, fiercely, after a pause. "I told him I should never forgive him if he deserted me at the Ball, and I never shall. He must have known he was choosing between the Bianchi and me. I wish him joy of his choice. *She* will never cross my threshold. Fool that I was to be taken in so, all the winter! What could I have done more for him? I brought out this charming Somers girl in order that he might marry her if he liked, and if he has the bad taste to prefer an operatic foreigner, I wash my hands of him, that's all."

"Well," said Ethel, "I must say I admire his pluck in marrying the woman he really likes best, even if she was on the stage."

"Oh! of course *you* think it's all right, with your socialist ideas. I am old-fashioned enough to think it better that people should marry into their own class. It is a pity your sister-in-law Miss Mainwaring was not on the spot. She might have acted as bridesmaid. Ha! ha!"

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Lady Maude's mirth was unpleasant, and Ethel saw that there was no use in pursuing the subject. The older lady reverted to it again, however, a day or two afterwards, with a fresh burst of wrath, on the receipt of Christopher's letter, announcing that the ceremony had actually taken place. He had enclosed a touching little note from his wife, in which she threw herself on her mother-in-law's mercy, and spoke in such rapturous terms of her husband's goodness to her, that any woman's heart might have been softened, but Lady Maude tossed it into the fire.

"I have been waiting for this," she said; "now I am going to write to my lawyers and alter my will. I shall leave my money to your child, Ethel."

"Oh, Cousin Maude! pray don't. I could not bear to think I was disinheriting Christopher."

"No more you are, but I am. He has quite enough of his own. He won't starve. But that Italian woman shan't touch a penny of mine. Besides, I shan't leave it to *you*—I expect my life is as good as yours. I shall leave it to your child. I have no near relations on either side, and can do what I like with it. My poor husband had perfect confidence in my judgment."

Ethel was very much taken aback by this unexpected resolution of her cousin's, but Mr Mainwaring only laughed when she told him of the

conversation, and said Lady Maude would probably make and destroy many wills yet; the remote possibility of his unborn child being one day very wealthy did not affect his imagination as it did that of the expecting mother, who began to argue to herself the rights and wrongs of the whole vast question as to private property, the right employment of money, and the divisions of classes.

One day she took the opportunity of discussing the subject with Canon Curteis.

"My sister-in-law, Sophy Mainwaring, has no doubts at all," she said. "She is thoroughly logical and consistent in all her opinions, but I always distrust a flawless argument; it seems to leave no room for human nature. We are not machines, and so we act inconsistently; or, at least, I suppose that physical laws do exist, but they are too complicated for us to understand at present, so it is always the unexpected that is happening, both in politics, and on a small scale with individuals."

Canon Curteis had come across both Miss Mainwaring and Mr Willcox in their educational and philanthropic work, and while he disagreed with many of their methods he admired their disinterestedness, and declared that their devotion to their cause put many professing Christians to shame.

"I do not think," he said, "that community of goods is possible in a huge society like ours, but I think, of course, that great social gulfs, such as

separate classes now, are an enormous evil, and I am not in favour of large capitalists. There have been capitalists, no doubt, who have used their money well, but I do not think even then they have done so much good as if their fortunes had been split up into many moderate ones. Of course I believe that the evangelical counsel of poverty is the happiest as well as the highest way, but I do not say that all are called to it. What I do say, most strongly, is that much of the so-called 'raising of the masses' which is being attempted now, is doing harm rather than good, because it is not placed on a foundation of spiritual religion. He that saves his life shall lose his soul, is as true now as it was nineteen centuries ago."

Ethel sighed, but made no reply, and Canon Curteis resumed. "By-the-by, I said a few words yesterday to Miss Somers, as you wished me to do, about Count Bartoloff, but I do not think you need be under any anxiety as regards that."

"No," said Ethel. "I think Margaret is quite safe now."

The fact was, that after the Palace Ball, Margaret had felt such an overpowering need of a woman's sympathy and advice, that she had poured out her whole story into Ethel's ear, including her ride with Count Bartoloff, and Miss Jarvis's remarks at the picnic. Ethel, who never scolded, or said, "I told you so," had been full of sympathy, but her whole

face brightened when Margaret told her of her meeting with Arthur Gordon and of his evident pleasure at seeing her again.

"Surely, surely, Margaret," she cried, "you can see the difference between the two men. You don't wish the Count back, do you?"

"No, I don't," said Margaret, "I am glad he is gone. I think he cast a sort of unholy spell over me; but what is the use of getting to—to like Arthur Gordon, if he is too poor to marry, and if, besides, marriage would spoil his career? You must remember, Ethel, that he has taken care to let us know both those facts. Under the circumstances it seems to me that I have to take care of myself. He probably thinks I know that he only means to be friendly, and doesn't intend to make love to me."

"Poverty is such a relative word," said Ethel; "it is not as if you had been brought up in very great luxury."

"But I don't see the fun of marrying, only to be a drag on my husband. You know the way sailors are always going on about this or that man having ruined himself by his marriage. Could you advise me to do that?"

"It must depend a good deal on the woman."

"I don't know. They say the Service and the family pull in two opposite directions, and I expect they must do so."

"You have thought a great deal about it."

"Of course I have," said Margaret, getting crimson, "often when I was cross and nasty, it was that I could think of nothing else. Well, what would you advise me to do?"

"I really don't know," said Ethel, "it is very perplexing."

She heard the other side of the story the next day from Arthur himself. The lad hurried up to Bello Sguardo at the earliest possible moment, and was delighted to find Mrs Mainwaring alone; in a few minutes all his reserve melted away, and he spoke more unreservedly than he had ever done before. When he began, however, to ask some questions about Margaret's friendship with Count Bartoloff, Ethel hesitated before replying, and then she said:

"I do not know that I have any right to tell you more than what anyone may know, that there is not, and never was, any engagement between them."

Arthur's face cleared, but he wanted more particulars.

"Mr Gordon," said Ethel, "I must ask you one question first; do you wish to marry Margaret yourself?"

"I love her with all my heart and soul," he replied.

"But that is not the same thing," said Ethel;

"if you are not sure whether you mean to marry her, I am afraid I must advise her to have nothing more to say to you. She has already got herself talked about in connection with the Count (and that was partly your fault too), and it would not do——"

"How do you mean 'my fault,'" he asked, rather indignantly.

"Only that Margaret was naturally rather angry when you left without a word. She was piqued at what seemed your desertion, and so she was more ready to make friends with Count Bartoloff. I don't mind telling you in confidence that the Count did actually propose to her, and that she refused him."

Arthur Gordon got very white. "So you think I am behaving badly to her," he said.

"I think you are not justified in trying to make her fond of you, if nothing more can come of it."

"But, Mrs Mainwaring, what am I to do?" cried the young man, distractedly. "Whenever I see her I lose my head, she is so awfully pretty, and charming, and jolly, and everything that a girl ought to be. Of course if I thought she'd have me, I'd propose to her to-morrow; but what have I got to offer her? I have only £200 a year of my own besides my pay—and then it is such a life for a girl! her husband always away—no home, no comfort anywhere."

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"Would you be willing to leave the navy and do something else?"

Arthur gave a gulp before he answered.

"Yes," he said, "I would. I didn't think three months ago that a woman lived who could make me give up the Service, but I would do it for her. Only—I don't know what work I could get to do. It isn't easy to find. What do you advise me to do?"

"Oh! I never advise anything," said Ethel. "I see both sides of a question much too plainly."

"I tell you what I will do," cried Arthur, springing up. "I will apply to be sent to some other station; I daresay I can get an exchange, especially now I have got some Kudos by this expedition with Martin. But I will tell Miss Somers first, why I am afraid to stop here, and if I can find some other work with better pay and a better life for her, I will come back and ask her to share it with me."

CHAPTER XXXII

MARSA SCALA

THE Palace Ball had closed for the present the long list of dances, but for those who could relish milder forms of dissipation there were plenty of dinners, teas, and picnics, to say nothing of races, polo matches, and tandem or bicycle meets.

Margaret and Arthur thus met frequently, but though always friendly and pleasant to him, she was on her guard, and for some time he had no opportunity of saying anything to her in private. He found one at last, however, on a lovely spring afternoon, when a large party had ridden and driven out to a picnic at the pretty little fishing village of Marsa Scala, and after lunch were strolling about among the rocks and along the cliff. By a little manœuvring he had contrived to separate himself and Margaret from the rest of the company, and persuaded her to sit down on a sunny rock at whose feet the tiny waves were breaking in bright, snowy foam-flakes. It was a fascinating spot; the promise of summer was in the air and perhaps the

softness and beauty all round made the girl more ready to listen, or perhaps she was only tired of holding him at arm's length, but at any rate the moment seemed a favourable one, and he seized it.

"I have so often wanted to ask you something," he began, almost at once, "or at least to tell you. I am thinking of getting an exchange and going to China."

"Oh! are you?" said Margaret, and she changed colour a little.

She did not ask "why?" but he went on:

"You see I thought there was going to be a war in the East, and that we should have been ordered off before this; but it seems things are quieting down, and that there is not likely to be one this spring after all."

"Well?" said Margaret.

"Well, I am afraid to stop here, that is the long and short of it. I had better go before I make a fool of myself and make you angry, that is all."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh! you know! I am sure you must understand that—that I love you better than anything in the world, better than my life, better than the Service even, but that I have no right to ask you to be my wife, because I am poor, and because while I am a naval officer I daren't ask you to live such a life as you would have to do. There, now, I have said it! Do you understand?"

Her face was averted. She was digging little holes in the white road with the end of her riding-whip.

"Perhaps you think I have no right to speak to you at all," he went on anxiously; "but I could not go away a second time without letting you know why. You aren't angry with me, are you? Won't you say you are a little sorry for me?"

His voice shook and his face was white. Margaret turned hers slowly round and their eyes met.

"Oh!" she said with a sob, "I don't know what to say. I don't know how to let you go."

Arthur gave a great gasp. "Do you mean that?" he said. He put his arm round her waist, drew her head down on his shoulder and kissed her passionately.

"My darling!" he murmured, "I have never dared to hope for this."

They sat quite still, speaking little and wrapped up in their new bliss for some minutes, till at the sound of voices approaching they started apart.

"Don't say a word to anybody," she said quickly. "I must think it all over. Come to-morrow to Bello Sguardo at tea-time, and I will contrive somehow to see you alone, and then we can settle what is to be done."

"I am afraid I can't possibly to-morrow," he said sadly, "it is my day on duty, but I will try to get a fellow to look out."

"Well, the day after, then."

"All right. It seems a most appallingly long time to wait, but I suppose it can't be helped. Oh! I say, Margaret (I may call you that, mayn't I), you might give me one kiss before we separate. You haven't kissed me at all yet."

"I have never kissed any man except my father or my brother."

"I should hope not! but you might make an exception for me."

"I let you kiss me. That is making an exception for you."

"But it isn't at all the same thing."

"Are you quite sure no one can see?"

"Absolutely certain. Come, put up your veil properly."

"Make haste, someone may come round the corner."

"I am only too anxious for you to make haste. But you are so slow."

Margaret got pink all over as she touched his cheek with her lips, but he held her hands tight and drew her to him again, till their lips met.

It was hard after this to appear before everyone as if nothing had happened. With the pride and joy came also the jealousy of possession. Arthur hated to let another man mount Margaret and ride by her side, and Margaret bit her lips when Arthur lifted another girl on to her pony and rode

after a carrozze, laughing and talking to the ladies inside. And when they all separated at Porta Sant' Anna, she was afraid even to let him touch her hand, but smiled and waved a farewell to everyone at once, and cantered off down the hill towards Bello Sguardo.

That evening, she begged Ethel to come into her room, and by the fire they sat and talked till a late hour. Margaret never forgot this talk, for it was the last of the many which she had had with her friend. Ethel was full as usual of sympathy and pleasure in Margaret's happiness.

"I cannot help being happy," said the girl ; "though it is all so vague, and I don't know how it will end. I don't suppose my parents will allow us to be engaged, until his prospects are rather more certain ; but I feel as if I could wait a long time, now I am sure that we do care for each other. It is the uncertainty that is so hard to bear, don't you think so ?"

"Yes," said Ethel, "the uncertainties of life are generally worse than the realities—not always, but very often. I can't help being glad, dear, that you two have found each other at last. I always thought you were suited for each other, and I have a kind of faith, that it will all come right some day. You are young, and we all have to bear troubles of some kind or another, and perhaps *if you have the trial of waiting before you marry,*

you will have fewer troubles afterwards. I like Mr Gordon; I think he is honest and straightforward and good, besides being clever. I think he will get on in anything he does, and I think he will make you happy."

Margaret squeezed Ethel's hand tight. "Tell me your theory of marriage," she said.

"My theory? Oh! my dear child, I don't know that I have one. There must be as many different sorts of marriages as there are different sorts of people. I fancy in most cases it is happier when the man is the stronger of the two, as it will be in your case. But I don't think a woman need be simply her husband's slave. There ought to be some sympathy in tastes and pursuits, but there may be wide differences of opinion and character. Of course a man may only seek a plaything or a housekeeper, but that is a poor kind of marriage."

"Yes, indeed!" said Margaret; "fancy marrying a man on those terms!"

"There is one thing you must remember," said Ethel; "most women find it hard when their honeymoon is over and their husband goes back to his work. They are not only lonely, which is often inevitable, but they are jealous of the man's interest in his profession. Their own household work is quickly done, and they often find it dull and tedious, and don't take the pride in

it that our mothers and grandmothers did. They read novels instead of cooking and sewing, or they go out and gossip all day, or they mope and get cross, and resent it when their husbands are keen and happy in their work."

Margaret smiled, and Ethel went on.

"Marriage does not make half so much difference in a man's life as it does in a woman's. Every woman knows this, but we all in turn find it hard to realise. They still go to their office for so many hours a day, or they have the same duties as before in their regiment or their ship ; whereas a girl leaves her parents and her brothers and sisters, and instead of being one among many is often left all alone for the greater part of the day, and has to find new occupations to fill up her time. One great safeguard is, I am sure, that husbands and wives should be perfectly open with each other. Concealment, even with the purest object, destroys confidence and perhaps eventually love."

"Do you think, if a husband and wife disagree, that the wife ought always to give in?"

"No, not necessarily. There must be give and take, it ought not to be all on one side, and the more equality there is between the two the happier, in my opinion. But I do think that the husband ought to be the head of the house ; there can't with any comfort or order be two heads to anything. The woman is weaker physically ; speaking

generally, her part is passive and the man's active. We may not like it, but we can't alter our constitution, and the facts in nature are plain."

"Then you agree with St Paul, after all," said Margaret.

"St Paul was a great philosopher," said Ethel; "and as regards this particular question I remember so well a wedding I was at of a friend of mine, when a famous Broad Church clergyman gave the address, and practically said, St Paul was very antiquated in his ideas, and that men and women were on an absolute equality. Well, my friend never had a day's health after her marriage. She had a baby within the year and died. The husband, who appeared inconsolable, married again very quickly, and has now a large and flourishing family."

"Oh, Ethel!"

"What a horrid story to tell you now, poor child! I only meant to show what nonsense it is to say that men and women are absolutely on an equality. Marriage does, and must always, affect women far more than men, both physically and morally, but for all that they can be blissfully happy in it, as I have been. I feel as if, when I have my baby in my arms, I shall have nothing more to wish for."

CHAPTER XXXIII

LADY MAUDE'S OFFER

THE following day Ethel told Lady Maude what had happened, and how want of means was likely to be the only real obstacle to the young people's marriage.

"Dear Cousin Maude," she said, "if you want to give some of your money away, why don't you let them have it, and make it possible for them to marry? I don't think I want my baby to be rich. You know we have a little of our own, and whether it is a boy or a girl we mean to bring it up to earn its own living."

"You little goose," said Lady Maude, "I never said I wanted to *give* my money away. I said I should *leave* it to your child, which is quite a different thing. However, I will think about what you say. Margaret is a good girl, and I am fond of her, and I expect her parents thought I was going to marry her to Christopher. I like young Gordon too. I daresay I may do something for them."

Arthur had sent a message to say that "a fellow"

had taken part of his duty for him and that he would be up at Bello Sguardo to tea. He was rather chagrined at being shown into the drawing-room, where Lady Maude was sitting alone, and was much astonished when she began at once.

"So, Mr Gordon, you have been making love to Margaret, I hear!"

"Has she told you?"

"You need not look so surprised if she had, but as a matter of fact she did not; she told my cousin, Ethel Mainwaring, who told me. Now I do not approve of secret engagements."

"It is not an engagement at all."

"Secret understandings that are not engagements are worse than anything."

"But, Lady Maude, we only had five minutes alone together. We were going to talk it all over to-day. You won't prevent my seeing her?" and he looked round anxiously.

"All in good time, there is no special hurry" (Arthur fidgeted with his feet). "Now then, as I am here in charge of Margaret, I have some right to know what you intend to do. First of all, of course, you will write to her father, and explain what your means and prospects are."

"But you don't understand how it happened!" cried Arthur; "I was telling her that I could not stay here and meet her every day without letting her know how fond I was of her, and therefore

that I had better go away, because I was a poor naval officer and ought not to marry."

"And so you immediately proceeded to ask her to marry you."

"No, I didn't, Lady Maude. I did not wish to bind her at all, but then she told me she—she——"

"Oh! of course, love in a cottage, and all that sort of thing. That is what girls always say. But you don't, I presume, wish to subject Margaret to the miseries of poverty. If you marry on nothing a year, you are sure to have a dozen children, and she will be an invalid."

"Well, that is just what I meant," said Arthur, smiling, but rather bitterly; "but if she prefers to wait, I can't help it; of course I would rather wait ten or twenty years, if I thought I could have her at last."

"Nonsense!" cried Lady Maude; "a long engagement wears a girl to fiddle-strings. You ought either to marry or to see no more of each other—not write, mind, or have any communication—and forget all about each other as quickly as possible."

Arthur made a gesture of impatience.

"I am waiting to hear what Miss Somers has to say, as soon as you will let me see her; and, of course, the decision must lie with her father. But I cannot understand why it might not at least be left uncertain until I see if I cannot find some other work *that pays better, so that we might marry.*"

"Now, listen," said Lady Maude, "you are very anxious to get away from me, but I have a proposal to make to you. If you will leave the navy and take up politics, and if Mr Somers approves of the engagement, I will give Margaret ten thousand pounds on her wedding-day, and will settle a sum in trust for you, the income of which will enable you to live respectably, and will not cease with my death. By-the-by, you are on the right side in politics, I suppose? One can never be certain in these days."

"I don't know much about politics," said Arthur; "but so far as I am anything, I suppose I am a Conservative; at any rate, I am a strong Imperialist."

"Oh! that will do. We can educate you. I have been looking out for a candidate to contest our Division. At one time I hoped my son would stand, but now I am displeased at his marriage, and that idea is at an end. Well, what do you say to my proposal?"

"I hardly know what to say, except to thank you very much for such extraordinary kindness," said Arthur, hesitating. "It has taken me so completely by surprise, and would mean such a tremendous change of everything, that it is rather hard to take it in. May I talk it over with Miss Somers before I give you an answer?"

"You have asked to go to Margaret every other minute since you have been here, so to quiet you,

I suppose I must let you go," said Lady Maude, good-naturedly. "You ought to jump at any means by which you might be able to marry her, but you don't seem to do so. Perhaps you are not so very keen, after all. Margaret is in the billiard-room."

"Oh! please don't think me ungrateful," cried Arthur, moving towards the door; "indeed, your goodness is quite overwhelming, but I never can explain things properly," and he fled.

When he opened the billiard-room door Margaret was standing by the fire, with an unmistakable look of waiting and listening in her face. She sprang to him, and they were in each other's arms in a moment.

"Oh, Arthur!"

"Oh, Margaret!"

"I thought you were never coming."

"So did I. Lady Maude gave me such a talking-to."

"How do you mean? a scolding?"

"Yes, to begin with; I am sure she thinks I had no right to make love to you, and I am afraid I hadn't."

"You couldn't help it," said Margaret, saucily.

"No, I couldn't," he said; "that is true. However, your father isn't likely to believe me if I tell him so. But have you any idea what Lady Maude proposed to me?"

"Not the faintest ; what ?"

"Why, that I should give up the Service and go into Parliament, and then she would give you ten thousand pounds on our wedding-day, and make an allowance besides, so that we could live."

"Oh, Arthur! how extraordinarily generous ; and oh, dear! how lovely it would be."

"You would like it, would you?" he asked ; "I should have to take my father's opinion before I accept it. You see it would tie us very closely to Lady Maude. I should almost feel as if I were obliged to vote as she ordered me—and that sort of dependence is not very pleasant. But it would enable us to marry, no doubt—at least if your father and mine approve of the idea—but I think we ought to know first exactly what would be expected of us, and under what kind of obligation we should be to the old lady."

"Yes. I had not thought of that," said Margaret, seriously. "Arthur!" she stopped.

"Yes—Arthur! It is very nice to hear you call me that!" he said ; "what did you want to say?"

"I didn't mean to be forward," she said, laughing. "It slipped out by accident. You see we are not engaged yet, are we?"

"I suppose not—formally."

"And I don't want to be, until I have told you all about—about—Count Bartoloff."

"What about him?"

"Don't look so stern, or I shan't have courage to tell you."

"What do you want to say? You aren't fond of him, are you?"

"No. I don't care a scrap for him now—but I think I nearly did. He asked me to marry him."

"Showed his good taste."

"But I think it was partly my fault that he asked me."

"Oh, rubbish! The man was a beast. He had no business to think of you or speak to you—less even than I have—and he only got his deserts when you sent him to the right-about."

"You don't mind, then?"

"Mind! No! Why should I? You won't let anyone else propose to you now."

"Of course I shan't," said Margaret, indignantly. "You know really the chief reason that I flirted with Count Bartoloff was because I was so unhappy while you were away, and I thought you did not care for me a bit. So I liked to feel that someone did, and I thought I would show you when you came back."

"Little silly," said Arthur, drawing her very close to him; "and all the time I was thinking of you all day——"

"And dreaming of me all night?"

"No; I don't dream! But now to business. What shall I say to Lady Maude? She will expect some kind of answer."

"Oh, Arthur! say what you like. Don't be afraid on my account. I mean, don't sacrifice your independence to please me. I don't want to feel I have made you give up a profession you are fond of, and bound you to a life you hate."

"It isn't that exactly," said Arthur, "which makes me hesitate. I couldn't hate any life with you at my side. But I don't like to owe my livelihood and yours to anyone's generosity. I feel I ought to earn it myself. It would be a bit of a struggle to leave the Service, of course, but that's another matter altogether. You understand, don't you?"

"Perfectly; and I could wait, you know. I am willing to wait. And then I am not a fine lady. We aren't rich at home. I am accustomed to do a great deal for myself. I know a lot about cooking, and dressmaking, and all that sort of thing. I think I could keep house cheaply. I could do with very few servants and a very small house, or rooms, or anything, so long as we were together."

"Ah! but that is just the difficulty. If I go on in the Service I must be constantly away. You would have the loneliness to face too, as well as the small means."

"Well, I would try to bear that too," said Margaret, bravely, though even as she spoke her eyes filled with tears, as the vision that his words

called up flashed before her—the vision of a tired woman alone in a small dingy room, reading a foreign letter with passionate eagerness, while the great London world hummed outside, unheeding.

He watched her with a kind of adoring pity, and seemed to answer her thoughts even more than her words.

“No, darling, I could not let you do that. I must find some other way—Lady Maude’s, or another. Let us come and talk to her.”

They went into the drawing-room, but found it deserted.

“Perhaps she has gone up to see Ethel, who has not been very well to-day,” said Margaret; but a minute later Lady Maude herself burst into the room in a state of great agitation.

“Oh! dear Mr Gordon!” she exclaimed, “are you going into Valetta? Oh! I wish you would call at Dr Vella’s. I sent for him an hour ago, but he has not come, and Ethel is very ill. If Dr Vella is not at home, find *someone*; we must have a doctor. The nurse has come and she is very much frightened. If only Dr Masters had not hurried away like that! It was just like him—so very inconsiderate. He might have known this would happen. He might have waited. Oh! pray, Mr Gordon, make haste!”

“I will go this moment,” said Arthur, and, with a hasty embrace to Margaret, he departed.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

ETHEL had been feeling unwell all day, and after lunch was obliged to go to her room and send her husband to fetch a doctor. Dr Vella, a dark, lithe little Maltese, who had been trained in London hospitals and spoke excellent English, told her that he feared her trouble was coming upon her prematurely, and that he would send her an English nurse immediately. The nurse she had engaged was not coming out to Malta for another six weeks, and she was therefore dependent upon local resources, but there were several English nurses in Valetta, and one of them, who was disengaged, was soon installed in Ethel's room.

There was no special anxiety on her account; she had strictly followed Dr Vella's instructions and had nothing with which to reproach herself, and she concealed her terror—which was very real—under a perfectly composed manner. Dr Vella had promised to return in the evening, and was not at home when an urgent summons was sent

to him about five o'clock ; but when Arthur brought Lady Maude's second message he had just returned, so he jumped into the carrozze Arthur had come in, and while the young sailor went back to his ship, the doctor hurried to Bello Sguardo.

Lawrence had not left his wife since he had brought Dr Vella to her early in the afternoon. The nurse wished Ethel to be left alone with her, and indeed Lawrence was not of the least use in the sickroom, but the husband and wife refused to be parted ; he sat quite still, watching her, and this silent attention, though it worried the nurse, rather soothed the patient than otherwise. At times she talked to him, discussing plans and possibilities, or when the suffering was too *severe*, she simply held his hand. As for him, his misery, if dumb, was none the less acute.

When Dr Vella returned she was already becoming exhausted, but it was not till midnight that the child was born, and there were no signs of life in it whatever ; everything possible was done, but there was not the faintest breath.

Ethel had been for some hours chiefly under the influence of chloroform, and did not recover full consciousness until the morning. Dr Vella, who was alarmed at her weakness, remained with her all night, and was there when she awoke. Her first word was "Lawrence !" Her husband was at her side in a moment.

"Yes, darling," he said.

"What has happened? where is it?" she asked.

"The baby? Oh, my dear! it was not alive; we never expected it would be," he answered gently.

"Oh, Lawrence! I want it!" she moaned.
"Let me see it!"

"It is impossible, my dear one," he replied.
"Try to think it is best so. It never breathed. It had no pain. If it had lived it could never have been a strong, healthy child."

"Oh! but I want it so badly! to go through all this and then to have nothing!" and she began to cry feebly.

"Mrs Mainwaring must not talk," said Dr Vella, signing to the nurse to bring her something to drink. "Take this and then go to sleep again."

Ethel swallowed what was given her, but she did not close her eyes, and moaned again, "I want my baby."

The nurse tried to soothe her, but she paid no heed to her, and Lawrence was so overcome that he followed the doctor out of the room.

"Don't be unnecessarily anxious," said the little man, kindly. "Mrs Mainwaring has not yet recovered her self-command after all the opiates she has taken. There is sure to be some distress and disappointment, but the only thing now is to keep her absolutely quiet. Don't let any other person into the room on any pretence whatever. I should

advise you to lie down yourself. If we can keep our patient's strength up, she will do well, and there is only a very slight rise of temperature. I shall be back myself in three or four hours."

Lady Maude and Margaret both waylaid the doctor as he went out, and to both he gave the same directions and encouragement. Mrs Mainwaring was ill, no doubt, there was cause for anxiety, but not for alarm ; the chief danger was excitement, which would produce fever and exhaustion ; she must be kept in perfect quiet. Lady Maude, whose conscience had uneasily reminded her that if she had not flown into a passion a fortnight before with Dr Masters, Ethel would at the present moment be under his care, was relieved that Dr Vella seemed to feel perfectly capable of managing the case, and immediately jumped to the conclusion that she had been needlessly anxious. The doctor was in a hurry, and could not be detained. Margaret, pale from sleeplessness and anxiety, which was very far from being relieved by Dr Vella's words, turned sadly back into the drawing-room. Canon Curteis was waiting there to hear her report ; he also had been up all night, in case of being summoned to the sickroom, and decided that he would not go beyond the garden during the day. The whole household was in fact in a state of tension. The servants shared in the uneasiness, for Ethel's

winning manner and ready sympathy, even more than her thoughtful unselfishness, had made her beloved. She claimed little and gave much, and good measure, pressed together and running over, had been meted out to her in return.

But even her husband's love seemed strangely helpless now. The unsatisfied mother's cry would not be stilled. The crown of her life, the hope for which she had borne discomfort and agony bravely, was denied her, and the weakened body enfeebled the usually tenacious will, the suffering brain no longer kept the natural desires under its stern control. Ethel was fretful and restless; she cried nearly all day—softly, it is true, but continuously—and towards evening her temperature became very high. Dr Vella on his return confessed that he was greatly disappointed, and that the case was most serious. During the night a military and a naval surgeon were called in, and the three doctors had a long consultation, but by this time the patient was delirious, recognised no one, and talked incoherently about all the subjects which had been occupying her thoughts during the past weeks, but chiefly about her baby. At times she thought she had it in her arms, and talked to it in a mother's endearing language; once, when this was going on, Lawrence, who had taken no rest and little food, broke down altogether, and was obliged to leave the room once more.

A second nurse was sent for, and during an interval when the patient seemed to sleep, Margaret was allowed to come in and see her for a moment ; but the doctors were all unanimous in insisting on keeping the room perfectly quiet and free from visitors.

Towards morning, the temperature dropped suddenly, and there was once more hope, if only her strength could be maintained. She found it, however, very difficult to take any nourishment, and was in a most exhausted condition.

Lawrence had returned, perfectly calm again, and seeing she wished to speak, bent over her. "What is the matter ?" she asked, "have I had fever ?"

He made a sign of affirmation.

"Then I shall die," she said.

There was terrible silence for a moment. He knew it was useless to hide the truth from her, but as the end was not yet absolutely certain, he told her that there was still hope, if she kept very quiet. She did not speak for some time, but lay with closed eyes. Presently he saw that big tear-drops were oozing slowly out from under the lids. He wiped them gently away.

"Oh, Lawrence ! I can't die ! I can't !" she sobbed, in her feeble whisper. "Save me, darling ! I can't go yet. I have only just begun to live ; we have so much to do together, and I might still have a baby. Oh ! I can't die ! it is cruel."

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"Hush! hush! dearest; try and be calm," he said; "you will only make things worse if you excite yourself."

"Don't be hard on me," she wailed; "it is dreadful to go; don't be angry with me."

"Angry! hard! my darling—my precious wife!" he said, and then his voice broke, and he hid his face in the pillow.

She was sobbing too, but his very misery seemed to calm her. "Lawrence!" she said, "you might pray. I don't suppose it will do much good, but you might try."

The unhappy husband raised his head, surprised. "I—I don't think I can," he murmured, "but I will ask Canon Curteis to come, if you like; shall I?"

She said yes, and he went. The Canon was in the garden, and came immediately, but before they could reach the room Ethel had sunk into a state of coma; she did not recognise them, or take any notice when they knelt down and the priest recited the prayers for the dying, and after waiting some time he saw it was useless to attempt to speak to her, and left Lawrence alone with her, saying that he would return at once, if there were any change. The nurse applied restoratives and at length her heavy breathing became quiet, and she seemed to revive a little, opened her eyes, and touched her husband's hand. He bent down once more to

catch her whisper, which was very weak and hardly intelligible, but the look of anguish in her eyes intensified the horror of the few words he could hear. "Don't let me go! Keep me! Lawrence"—trying to grasp his fingers—"I am going! oh!—keep me."

She was dead, but the cold fingers still held his as in a vice. Alas! the final, fearful struggle to escape the lonely passage had but ended in this. When they loosed her hand from his, he fainted dead away, but she had gone forth into the darkness alone.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE FUNERAL

LADY MAUDE was almost beside herself with grief at her cousin's death. She had been really fond of her, and was haunted by the idea that if Dr Masters had been on the spot, Ethel's life might have been saved. There was probably no foundation for this, but it worked on her to such an extent that at times Margaret was almost anxious for her sanity. The girl's grief was all but swallowed up in the necessity for looking after Lady Maude, and it is difficult to know what the two women would have done without Arthur Gordon, who somehow managed to find time to make all the necessary arrangements for them. Lawrence Mainwaring was entirely prostrated, and incapable of attending to any business; he crept into his wife's room as soon as he was allowed, and stayed for hours standing by the bed gazing on the face, now perfectly calm, with that curious statuesque expression which Death alone can give. Perhaps it is the absolute stillness and unchangingness which makes such a

terrible contrast to the living face, so that we feel at once that it is only the image of our beloved who lies there. Yet even that wax-like image, awful in its silence and aloofness, is better than the absolute blank of nothingness, which follows when it is placed underground.

Lawrence went to the funeral, as one in a dream ; Margaret was there also with Canon Curteis and Arthur Gordon, and many others, but he did not seem to see them. Ethel's grave was in a pretty corner of the green, flowery English cemetery, where so many, old and young, are laid, far from their home and friends. The coffin was covered with wreaths, and the service was reverently read by one of the Chaplains, but the husband's despair was piteous to see. No one ventured to speak to him, and when all the funeral party had left, he remained alone, kneeling on the damp earth close to the spot where they had laid her who was the one joy of his life. He felt his own source of life and energy dry up within him ; what was the use of living without Ethel ? With her, he might have done great things, but fate had separated them, and there was no more hope. As to a future life, there might be one, he could not tell. Canon Curteis thought Ethel was in Purgatory ; the English Chaplain had told him he would meet her in Heaven ; a Brahmin would believe that her soul had now undergone transformation into another

body. He did not know if any were true. All he was sure of was that her body, that which had been the casket of his most precious jewel, was now undergoing physical changes which it was painful to contemplate, but by means of which the earth was replenished and repaid for its constant waste.

Through corruption came life in myriad forms, but alas! not the one form he loved. Oh! to be beyond forms! to grasp life itself, glorious, intangible, indestructible; to be a spark in that undying light, with her for a twin spark! His head sunk on his breast—he had almost opened his mouth to say, “What do you think, Ethel?” when the terrible stab at his heart reminded him that he was alone. She could not hear.

Lawrence stayed in the cemetery, in his trance of misery, till the evening fell and the gates were closed, and with him walked out another man whom he had not noticed before, but who had been watching him for more than an hour. It was Canon Curteis, who had been much struck by Lawrence’s almost childish helplessness, now his wife was gone, and who had returned to the graveyard to see what he was doing, with a vague idea that he might, in his wretchedness, unlightened by faith, be capable of committing suicide, or injuring himself in some way. But deliberate self-destruction was not in Lawrence’s thoughts. He was not a Christian, hardly even a Theist, but he had some

controlling sense of a Power that had placed him where he was, and to whose will he must submit. The burden seemed intolerable, but he would not by his own effort cast it off. Canon Curteis tried to put a little hope into his mind by speaking to him of the Incarnation—of the raising of the mortal into the Infinite and Undying, but he only shook his head sadly. "It may be true," he said; "but she and I could never feel sure. So far as I know, the Amœba—the unicellular organism—is the only structure that can rightly be called immortal. There are so many beautiful fairy-tales in so many different languages, but they all come from the childhood of the race. The only words which have at all comforted me are from the Rig-Veda, 'Creep close to the mother, that earth there, the broad, the all-embracing, the blissful! She is like a maiden, soft like wool to the pious, may she guard thee from the lap of destruction. Oh, earth, open wide, do not press her—be kind in admitting and in embracing her. Cover her, oh, earth, as a mother covers her son with her cloth.' That sounds primitive and soothing."

"It touches the outside of your grief, perhaps," said the Canon, "not the grief itself. The universal motherhood of earth brings no solace to your loneliness. It is not below you should look, but above; not to matter, but to spirit."

"If I were satisfied there is such a thing as

spirit!" sighed Lawrence. "I am inclined to believe in a great Unity, of which what we call matter and spirit are but differently perceived phenomena. But I have not studied philosophy enough to venture on an opinion."

Canon Curteis could get no further with him; the scientist could not, if he would, throw off the wrappings of his learning, and on every point the priest brought forward, he had something to say—something utterly agnostic and hopeless. He did not deny that there might be brightness beyond; if there were any future state, any reward for purity and loveliness of character, his wife would surely receive it, but he could see no scientific grounds for hope, and scientific reasons were the only ones which carried any conviction to him. He was grateful for the Canon's sympathy, and perceived his intense singleheartedness, but efforts to convert him left him cold and somewhat irritable.

Amidst all the distress and confusion, consequent on Ethel's death, Margaret and Arthur's arrangements had not progressed, but the position which the young sailor had taken up as agent and protector to the two ladies at Bello Sguardo did not pass unnoticed in Valetta society. Miss Jarvis drew her own conclusions. That young lady had left no stone unturned to discover the inner history of Sir William Browne's departure. The secret was on the whole well kept, but details oozed out

now and then, and were pieced together more or less accurately by the indefatigable student. The curiously sudden change of tone in the telegrams with reference to England's foreign relations had caused general remarks, but few persons connected it with the Maltese incident. Possibly our descendants, unearthing dusty archives in the Palace at Valetta and the Foreign Office in London, will come upon a singular correspondence, which will account for several seeming inconsistencies in the Government of the day. It would, indeed, have been a cause of great embarrassment if war had followed immediately after the carefully arranged plan of campaign had been revealed to a foreign power, even had the war been, not with that power, but with another. Loves of Princes have before now made and unmade alliances and expended blood and treasure like water ; it was left for an English General's wife, by her treachery, to prevent a war which would have been one of the most costly the world has ever seen. Whether our prestige did not suffer severely in consequence of our change of tone, and whether the war must not come sooner or later, is another question ; whether we shall ever again be in an equally favourable position to undertake it, if it is necessary, is one on which opinions are divided.

Be that as it may, English and Russian detectives combined to shadow Count Bartoloff, but no ob-

stacle was placed in the way of his return to Petersburg, and he entered that city, fully expecting to receive great reward for his exploit. It was not till he arrived there, that he learnt the steps taken by the English Government to destroy the effects of his discovery. The English Ambassador had received instructions to disavow the papers, as unofficial and misleading, and as the originals were in Valetta, there were no means of disproving this statement. In any case, the plans, such as they were, would of course undergo complete recasting, and the Russian Government was therefore at liberty to denounce the thief and disclaim any gratitude for his stolen information.

In exiling Count Bartoloff to Siberia, the bureaucracy of the Czar at once threw a sop to English diplomacy and gratified its own deferred vengeance, for the Count had in early youth belonged to the Reform party, and had narrowly escaped imprisonment some years previously. This time he was not so fortunate. He may still, in Siberian mines, be digesting the truth that even in this world vengeance does sometimes overtake the wicked.

But to return to Miss Jarvis. Her mother had continued very poorly, and the doctor had at last declared that she must no longer remain in Malta, but must return to England. This was a great blow to both the ladies, as the London house was let until May, but the doctor's orders were so per-

empty that there was no choice left ; even Isabel could not insist on her mother's remaining at peril of her life. Ethel's funeral was therefore the last function of the season for Miss Jarvis. It was Dr Vella who attended her mother, and through him—for he talked rather too freely about his patients—she had gathered many particulars as to Mrs Mainwaring's illness, Lady Maude's hysteria, and Margaret's dependence on Arthur Gordon. She did not succeed in speaking to the young sailor, who had to hurry back to his ship immediately on the conclusion of the service, but she spent the rest of the afternoon in paying farewell visits and in spreading abroad all the information, real and imaginary, which she had collected. Her arrows, however, fell harmless, now that Count Bartoloff had departed. While he was making love at once to Lady Browne and to Miss Somers there had been ground for scandal, but no one thought real harm of Margaret, even if she had been injudicious ; and everyone was ready to wish well to her engagement with Arthur Gordon.

Isabel's campaign had therefore ended altogether with less *éclat* than she had at one time had reason to expect, but if she carried off no prize from Valetta, she had at least gained fresh confidence in her own powers, and was ready to begin again elsewhere with renewed vigour.

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CHAPTER XXXVI

CONCLUSION

LITTLE more remains to be told of our story. Lady Maude took a violent dislike to Malta after her cousin's death, and refused to remain any longer at Bello Sguardo. She decided to take Margaret slowly home through Italy, reaching England, as originally arranged, in May.

The parting between Margaret and Arthur was very painful, for it was full of uncertainties and anxieties, besides the actual grief of separation. Arthur's tenderness and helpful care during the sad time they had just gone through had brought him very near to the girl ; she realised, more than ever before, the mixture of gentleness and strength which her lover possessed in an unusually high degree even among sailors, who are often remarkable for those manly and fascinating qualities. The future of the two young people was now in the hands of their respective parents, but it had been agreed that nothing should be definitely settled until Lady Maude had conversed both with Mr Somers and

with Arthur's father, so there were some weeks still during which their fate hung in the balance. As may be imagined, Margaret's tour through Italy caused her less pleasure than she could have believed possible, yet it was with mingled feelings of joy and nervousness that she returned to England.

Canon Curteis had worked hard to induce Lady Maude to pardon her son, and his efforts were not altogether unsuccessful ; she received Christopher and Maddalena at Naples, where they were living, but she did not invite them to Henbury ; and her offer to Arthur Gordon remained open.

Mr Gordon had been much astounded at the impression his son had made on the old lady ; he had had a long interview with Mr Somers, and had written to ask advice of Arthur's Captain and of the Admiral, who both replied that they should greatly regret if such a promising young officer left the Service. His success in the navy was, humanly speaking, assured, whereas political life was an untried field, for which he had shown no special aptitude. After anxious consideration, therefore, and after a conversation with Lady Maude Beaufoy, who showed herself unexpectedly reasonable and open to argument as well as generous, it was decided that Arthur should remain in the navy, for the present at anyrate ; but that if he and Margaret still desired to marry in a year's time, they should be allowed to do so, the wherewithal for a small

establishment being found by his pay, his allowance of £200 from his father and Lady Maude's £10,000, which was invested in trust securities for Margaret. Mr Gordon was making a large income at the Bar, but he had a numerous family and could not afford to increase his present allowance to his eldest son; still, it was felt that the marriage might, under such conditions, take place without absolute imprudence, and a year's probation seemed as nothing to the lovers after the utter uncertainty in which they had parted.

The months, however, passed slowly for Margaret, even in the midst of her bright home circle, and with the interest of her sister's prosperous love affair. There were no money difficulties in this, and Francie's youthful adorer seemed most absurdly boyish to the elder sister, and Francie herself strangely matter-of-fact over the whole business. She stipulated that she should wait to be married until Margaret's wedding-day. A double wedding was so pretty, she said.

It was not until the winter of the following year that the two marriages actually took place. They had been postponed until Arthur Gordon's return to England, for he had been appointed to the gunnery ship at one of the home ports, and for two or three years he and Margaret might therefore hope to be together.

Defying superstition, the two sisters were married

at the same time, early in December, by Canon Curteis in Henbury Church. Lady Maude was of course one of the party, and by Margaret's special wish Dr Masters was invited. His patroness greeted him with gracious amiability, as if no unpleasantness had ever taken place. Francie and her young bridegroom started off immediately after the ceremony on a tour round the world; while Arthur and Margaret, after a brief honeymoon, settled down into their tiny house in the seaport town.

It was the last day of the year. Margaret had been unpacking all their wedding-presents and making her little rooms look as pretty as possible, even with the somewhat shabby chairs and sofas of a "furnished house."

When Arthur came back from the ship, he hung the pictures on the walls, and stuck behind them a little holly and mistletoe which they had brought from Henbury. It was late in the evening when all was finished, and they sat down together by the fire, his arm round her waist.

"You don't regret it, darling?" he asked. "Do you really think you will be able to stand this?"

"Why not, Arthur?" she said, resting her head on his shoulder. "I am old-fashioned enough to think that love matters more than riches, and I would rather marry a man like you, who does something and is a man, than a boy like Francie's

husband, however many thousands a year he had. The only thing I am afraid of is, getting to love you so much that I shall not bear to let you go to sea."

"Well, we need not think of that yet," said Arthur.

"If only poor Ethel had been alive!" sighed Margaret; "she would have been so happy to see us together. By-the-by, have you heard anything of Mr Mainwaring lately?"

"Didn't I tell you? I had a letter from Colonel Thompson just before we were married. I thought I had shown it to you. He says poor Mainwaring died of fever in October. He wouldn't leave the place, you know, and spent hours every day in the cemetery. Fancy going on like that for eighteen months! The wonder is he lived so long, and I expect he was pretty well starving too, for he never ate unless the food was almost thrust down his throat."

"He did really love his wife," said Margaret, softly.

"Yes, but that does not seem to me the right way to show it," replied Arthur; "a man is not meant to spend all the day in a graveyard; there is always plenty of work to do for the living, and we can't bring back the dead."

"I am glad he is gone," said Margaret; "it is better than living like poor Lady Browne. When

I heard she had tried to drown herself, I thought at once of a little conversation I had with her about the woman who had thrown herself over the railway embankment. She said she could understand committing suicide, if one was unhappy enough. They say Sir William treated her perfectly brutally after they came home, and was constantly drunk, too." She shuddered. "Fancy having to live with a man like that!"

"Fancy having a wife like that!" he rejoined. "I expect she could have made anything of him if she had been a good woman. He was a fine old soldier, and it was through her his career was ruined."

"I suppose so. And that poor child! what will become of her, with a father who drinks and a mother insane! Oh, Arthur! what a terrible fate some people are born to!"

"I don't believe much in Fate," he answered; "at least, I believe we all have our chance, if we choose to use it."

"Some where, some when," she echoed; "yes, I hope so. It is hard sometimes to see where the ship is sailing to; but it would be harder still if one believed there were no man at the wheel, and that it was only drifting on aimlessly.—Hark! there are the bells. This is the first New Year for us two together."

"The first year of the twentieth century gone,"

said Arthur. "Well! we shan't live to see the last, but I hope we shall have many happy years together."

"I wonder if you ever heard the verses called 'Life' that Ethel was so fond of?" said Margaret. "They always remind me of her when I read them.

'A pebble from the grey hill-side,
A grain from wastes of sand,
A froth-shower of the ebbing tide,
A glimpse of lonely land.

'A tear from Sorrow's bitter rain,
A gem on Royal brow,
A link of History's weary chain,
A flash of th' infinite Now.

'Fragments, all Science, Art, and Skill,
Of that which was and is ;
Yet is each moment's choice and will
All Being's consciousness.

'To us the centre of the whole
Great Universe un-trod,
Without which Nature has no soul,
And Earth and Heaven no God.'

"I don't think I understand much of that," said Arthur ; "I was never great at poetry. But I do believe if a fellow does his duty, things will come right at last. Now we must go to bed, or I shall be late on board to-morrow."

THE END.





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